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Etymology and Time

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SOCRATES. Do you not understand then, Cratylus, that if someone seeking things should follow after names, examining the meaning of each, he would in such reflections run no small risk of being tricked?

PLATO, *Cratylus* 436AB

The cycle that must for the Wayfarer begin with the audition or the finding of a name, must for the Comprehensor end in silence where no names are spoken, none is named, and none remembered.

A. K. COOMARASWAMY

I

Not long ago I had the good fortune to attend a fine lecture on certain aspects of ancient mythology.* In the discussion which followed, it was suggested that the words *I* and *eye* are 'the same': this inspired some intriguing and insightful observations concerning the relationship between perception and a sense of identity.

What most struck me, however, was the fact that no one seemed to question the equation of *I* and *eye* which had provided these speculations with their starting-point. Yet if the statement that these words are 'the same' was meant, as I take it to have been, as an assertion that they have a common origin, not much reflection was required to see that this could scarcely be the case. The corresponding words look quite different even in languages which are closely related to English (thus German *ich*, *Auge*; Dutch *ik*, *oog*); and when the evidence is considered as a whole it becomes obvious that they go back to separate roots.¹ According to historians of the English language it is in fact only subsequent to Chaucer's time, and even then only at first in certain dialects, that the pronunciations of *I* and *eye* fell together.²

* This essay has benefited from the patience and insight of Stella von Boch and Grevel Lindop, who kindly read it in various earlier drafts, and offered several helpful and thought-provoking comments.

1. Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern and Stuttgart, 1959), pp. 291 (*eǵ-*), 775–7 (*okʷ-*). For those without access to Pokorny, an excellent guide to Indo-European etymology is *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, ed. Calvert Watkins (2nd ed.: Boston, 2000).

2. Joseph Wright and Elizabeth Mary Wright, *An Elementary Middle English Grammar* (2nd ed.: Oxford, 1928), pp. 55, 159.

Changes which the language has undergone over the centuries, and developments peculiar to specific times and places, have resulted in a resemblance which – however poetically and philosophically suggestive – must be seen to be contingent, not essential.

It is in the nature of language that such similarities should arise again and again, in ever-changing circumstances: another example comes readily to mind. Several years ago I had a job as a night watchman, in a building which used to be cleaned shortly before dawn. One morning, as I overheard the janitorial crew entering the premises and wondering aloud concerning my own whereabouts, I realised that the words *guard* and *God* are both pronounced as *gaahd* in one of the dialects of English spoken in Massachusetts. What I heard could easily have been interpreted as

- Where's the God?
- God must be asleep.

There is an existential poignancy here, with echoes of the forty-fourth Psalm;³ but in this instance I doubt that anyone would be tempted to argue that the words *guard* and *God* are in any significant sense 'the same'.⁴ Yet there is no real difference between this case and that with which I began: in both, localised historical developments in the sound system of English have turned two words into homonyms of one another.

I have dwelt upon the *I/eye* equation not in order to find fault with individuals, but because it seems to me to illustrate a widespread phenomenon. People interested in the wisdom which is to be found in sacred traditions, and in the esoteric dimension of religion – people whose interests are, broadly speaking, reflected in the activities of the Temenos Academy – tend to be fascinated by the origins, the inter-relationships, and the hidden significances of words. But this fascination is, more often than not, amateurish and uncritical. Again and again I have seen individuals of keen intelligence and profound

3. Verses 23–24: 'Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord? Arise, cast us not off for ever. Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face, and forgettest our affliction and our oppression?'

4. In the unlikely event that such a proposal were ever advanced, it could be very easily refuted. *God* goes back to Old English; while *guard* is a borrowing from French, cognate with English *ward*. The *gu-* in *guard* is therefore secondary, reflecting the standard treatment of Germanic *w-* in the Romance languages: compare French *gallois* vs. English *Welsh*, *guêpe* vs. *wasp*, *guerre* vs. *war*, *guichet* vs. *wicket*, etc.

learning throw all caution to the winds as soon as they turned to questions of etymology, associating the most disparate words with one another on the basis of superficial resemblances.

Lying behind such equations is the belief, most influentially put forward in recent centuries by Johann Gottfried Herder in his *Essay on the Origin of Language* (1772), that speech is 'a treasure chamber of human thoughts', rooted in poetic inspiration and symbolic thinking: if we can recover the primordial meanings of words, they can afford us insight into the mental worlds of our remotest ancestors.⁵ Thus Harold Bayley, in his 1913 study *The Lost Language of Symbolism* (often reprinted, and still influential), rejected 'the idea that identities of name were primarily due to punning, to blunder, or to accident' in favour of a quest for 'monosyllables that apparently are the debris of some marvellously ancient, prehistoric, almost extinct parent tongue'. In his view,

Modern language is a mosaic in which lie embedded the chips and fossils of predecessors in comparison with whose vast antiquity Sanscrit is but a speech of yesterday. In its glacier-like progress, Language must have brought down along the ages the detritus of tongues that were spoken possibly millions of years before the art of recording by writing was discovered, but which, notwithstanding, were indelibly inscribed and faithfully preserved . . .⁶

With such sentiments, and with the Romantic doctrine of linguistic origins from which they derive, I am entirely in sympathy. Difficulties begin with the attempt to put them into practice. When I first opened Bayley's book at random, the passage which caught my eye was the following:

The word *gazelle* means 'mighty blazing God'; the Persian *nilgau* – an antelope whose name means in Persian 'blue cow' – may be resolved into *un il ag au* 'the one God, the mighty A'; and the French *cerf* may be equated with the English *seraph*. The African *gnu*, like AGNEW, the English surname, resolves into the mighty, unique HU, who is everlastingly *new*. The Sanscrit for an antelope is *harina*,

5. *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, ed. Hans Dietrich Irmscher (Stuttgart, 1966), p. 115.

6. *The Lost Language of Symbolism*, 2 vols (London, 1913), i.12.

which is evidently allied to *hran*, the Anglo-Saxon, and *hreinn*, the Icelandic, for *deer*?⁷

So far as I can tell, every single suggestion advanced in this paragraph is wrong. Since demonstrating this point by point would be a lengthy undertaking (and ultimately a fairly fruitless one), we can content ourselves with a single example: the identification of French *cerf* with 'English' *seraph*. The latter word (as Bayley himself was of course well aware) is originally Hebrew, being generally held to derive from a Semitic root meaning 'to burn'.⁸ *Cerf* is the French reflex of Latin *ceruus* 'stag', whose closest English cognate is in fact the word *hart*.⁹ That the French word begins with an *s*-sound has nothing to do with its origins: it is due rather to phonetic developments in Latin, as that language was spoken in the sixth and seventh centuries A.D.¹⁰

When I have in the past ventured to raise objections of this kind, the reaction has often been disgruntled, or indeed dismissive: it was as if the laborious findings of scholarship were somehow less trustworthy than the spontaneous hunches of an amateur; or as if there could be two truths, one of reason and one of inspiration. This latter notion, however, is a facile evasion against which the voices of the wise have repeatedly been raised:¹¹ in seeking to shield the things of

7. *Ibid.*, ii.139.

8. Attempts have occasionally been made to explain similarities between the Hamito-Semitic and the Indo-European language families in terms of the derivation of both from a still older mother language: in recent times, this has been the position of the 'Nostratic' school of Russian philologists. But even if we were for purposes of argument to adopt such an approach in the present instance, it would not yield positive results. The Hebrew word *seraphim*, in its unique attestation in Isaiah 2, begins with the consonant *sin*; but if *cerf* (deriving from Latin *ceruus*, and related to *cornu* 'horn'; see below) has a Semitic counterpart, this would seem likelier to be the root reflected in Hebrew *qeren* 'horn', beginning with *qoph*. (For the identification, see Wilhelm Gesenius, *Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament*, trans. Samuel P. Tregelles [repr.: Grand Rapids, 1949], p. 744a.)

9. The correspondence of Latin *c* and English *h* is a regular phenomenon, determined by the philological principle known as 'Grimm's Law': with *ceruus/hart* we can compare the closely related words *cornu/horn*.

10. C. H. Grandgent, *An Introduction to Vulgar Latin* (Boston, 1907), p. 111.

11. Socrates would never have been condemned for impiety had his *daimon* not compelled him to bring his reason to bear on questions of the spirit. Similarly Eriugena (see below), in speaking of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church, did not hesitate to declare that 'every authority which is not approved by true reason is seen to be feeble' (*Periphyseon, Liber I*, ed. and trans. I. P. Sheldon-Williams (Dublin, 1978), p. 198 (my translation)).

the spirit from the irreverent scrutiny of the intellect, it introduces a dangerous split into our vision of reality, and may indeed be responsible for the genesis of modern secularism.¹²

Caution, and a sense of discernment, are not the same as indiscriminate scepticism: to say that false etymologies cannot help us to understand the thoughts of long ago is in no way to deny that true etymologies may be able to do so. Anyone willing to devote the necessary time and effort to studying the early stages of languages, and the intricacies of their relationships with one another, can be rewarded with fascinating glimpses into the depths of an unwritten past.

Two further remarks seem germane in this connection. First: it may be salutary to remember that the early Romantics, of whom the intuitive etymologists of the past century or so are the witting or unwitting heirs, were themselves no strangers to scholarly rigour. Indeed, some of them did crucial work in laying the foundations of Indo-European philology: among Herder's followers we find such figures as Jacob Grimm, pioneer historian and grammarian of the Germanic languages; and Friedrich Schlegel, the first German Sanskritist.

Second: authentic scholarship shares with all valid spiritual paths the demand that we sacrifice our own ideas and wishes in deference to a truth which lies beyond ourselves. This demand is worthy of respect: in the mind's life, as in the soul's, it represents a wholesome discipline. Thus – and only thus – do we open to ourselves the possibility of seeing and learning what we do not yet guess. The truth is not only often different from what we had supposed: it is also almost always more interesting.

II

It is important to distinguish clearly between etymologies which are based on what we have come to know regarding the nature and development of language, and etymologies which do not have this basis. But making this distinction should not mark the end of our inquiry, for 'unscientific' etymologies can be seen to have possessed a heuristic value of their own: down the ages, inspired minds have repeatedly found rich and illuminating meanings in linguistic conjectures which cannot be reconciled with the methods of philology. Yet the meanings are there, for all that; and the idea that they are

12. This is Philip Sherrard's compelling argument in his book *The Rape of Man and Nature* (Ipswich, 1987).

bound up with the origins of language has lent them a numinous authority.

For an example, we can look at the writings of the ninth-century Irishman Johannes Eriugena, one of the greatest thinkers of the early Middle Ages. Of *theós*, the Greek word meaning 'God', Eriugena stated that

it is derived either from the verb *theoró* 'I see', or from the verb *théo* 'I run'; or else – and this is more likely, for the meaning is one and the same – it is correctly taken to be derived from both. For when *theós* is derived from the verb *theoró*, it is understood to mean 'seeing': for He sees all things which are within Himself, since He beholds nothing outside Himself because nothing exists outside Him. And when *theós* is taken from *théo*, it is rightly understood to mean 'running': for He runs into all things, and in no way stands still, but fills all things with His running, as it is written 'His Word runs swiftly' [Psalm 147:15]. And yet He is not moved in any way. For it is most truly said of God that He is motion at rest, and moving stillness. For He abides unchanging in Himself, never forsaking His inherent stability; and yet He moves Himself through all things, so that those things may be which draw their being from Him. For all things come into being from His motion. And therefore there is one and the same meaning in these two interpretations of the one word 'God'. For to God, running through all things is no different from seeing all things, but all things come to be by His running, even as by His seeing.¹³

The idea that a single word can have two separate etymologies is, to say the least, acutely problematical from the standpoint of historical linguistics.¹⁴ For Eriugena, however, it provides the framework for articulating a metaphysical paradox, an important part of his understanding of the relationship between God and world. He is thinking not in terms of etymology as we understand it, but of a kind of verbal relationship which is not solely determined by the one-dimensionality of linear time.¹⁵

Eriugena's source for this twofold derivation of *theós* has not been

13. Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, *Liber I*, p. 60 (my translation).

14. Not surprisingly, it seems highly unlikely that *theós* is in fact historically related to either *théo* or *theoró*: see Pokorny, *Wörterbuch*, pp. 243 (*dhāu-*), 259–60 (*dhēs-*, *dheu-*).

precisely identified, although its terms are severally to be found in the writings of such Greek Fathers as Eusebius of Caesarea, Clement of Alexandria, and Gregory of Nazianzus.¹⁶ The closest parallel however is afforded by John of Damascus:

... As for the name *theós*, it is derived from *théein* 'to run', and to have dealings with all things ... or it is from *theâsthai* 'to behold' all things. For nothing escapes [God's] notice, and He is the 'witness of all' [3 Maccabees 2:21]. For He beheld 'all things before they came to be' [Daniel 13:42], knowing them timelessly.¹⁷

Here we can see the ingredients of Eriugena's analysis: but Eriugena appears to have been himself responsible for the idea that *both* etymologies are true, and for justifying this interpretation with the paradox that God is 'motion at rest, and moving stillness' (*motus stabilis et status mobilis*). In this he was probably guided by his reading of Dionysius the Areopagite, who had stated in his treatise *On Divine Names* that God in His universality comprehends all opposites, and is 'stillness and motion for all things' (*status ... omnibus et motus*).¹⁸

If Eriugena innovated in his use of the Fathers of the Church, the Fathers can be seen to have innovated in their own right. Thus their association of *theós* 'god' with *théo* 'I run' goes back to a passage in Plato's dialogue *Cratylus*, where however it is put forward in a very different spirit:

It seems to me that the first men dwelling in Greece believed only in such gods as do many of the barbarians now: sun and moon and earth and stars and heaven. Beholding all of these always going upon their course, and running, they named them 'gods' (*theoùs*)

15. For some perceptive remarks on the pre-modern attitude to etymology, which he characterises as 'simultaneously a philosophical and linguistic approach', see Rolf Baumgarten, 'A Hiberno-Isidorean etymology', *Peritia* 2 (1983), pp. 225–8.

16. See Sheldon-Williams's discussion in his notes to Eriugena, *Periphyseon, Liber I*, p. 228. As he observes, the two derivations are found juxtaposed in a manuscript deriving from Eriugena's circle: but this may reflect Eriugena's influence, rather than a source upon which he drew.

17. *De fide orthodoxa*, chapter 9; Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* xciv.836–7.

18. *De diuinis nominibus*, chapter 4. I cite Eriugena's own translation, printed in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* cxxii.1133; for the original Greek cf. *id.*, *Patrologia Graeca* iii.704.

because it was their nature to run (*thein*). Later, learning of the other [gods], they called them all by this name.¹⁹

The *Cratylus* is an elaborately ironic dialogue, at least one of the aims of which seems to have been that of poking fun at the real Cratylus, who had been one of Plato's teachers:²⁰ it remains a matter of debate how much in earnest Plato was with regard to any of the etymological theories which are advanced there.²¹ Even without confronting this larger question, however, we can see that Plato's attitude to the crucial word *theós* contrasts sharply with that of John of Damascus, and even more so with that of Eriugena. Where Eriugena's interpretation is ahistorical, paradoxical, and metaphysically profound, Plato's is historicist, rationalistic, and reductionist. In his eyes there is no wisdom to be found here, only the first religious gropings of his savage forebears.

Plato in turn may have taken this etymology from the Pythagoreans; and it is noteworthy that we here find ideas somewhat closer to those of the Irish theologian. A passage attributed to Philolaus, referring to the perpetually revolving heavenly bodies, speaks of the 'ever-running divine' (*aei théontos theíou*) as being both 'unchanged' and 'moving from age to age':²² an adjective directly related to *theós* is here linked, as *theós* itself was to be for Eriugena, with the paradoxical unity of changelessness and movement.

I hope that this excursus has been of some interest. Its primary purpose has been to show that, although the association of words invoked by Eriugena has a long history, that history is an exoteric one.

19. *Cratylus* 397CD.

20. Cratylus was a follower of Heraclitus; and the philosophy which Socrates pretends to discover in the roots of words is a caricature of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux. According to Aristotle, Cratylus's own conception of the flux became so extreme that it destroyed his belief in the efficacy of language itself: 'In the end he thought that it was not necessary to speak, but only moved his finger; and he found fault with Heraclitus for saying that one cannot step into the same river twice, for he believed [it to be possible] not even once' (*Metaphysics* iv.5.18; cf. i.6.2).

21. I am not competent to address this topic adequately here. For useful discussion, with further references, see Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford, 1995), pp. 167–70. Ernst Cassirer provides a concise and lucid assessment of the *Cratylus* in the broader context of Plato's thought regarding language (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, trans. Ralph Manheim, 3 vols (New Haven, 1955–7), i.123).

22. Fragment §21 in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. and trans. Hermann Diels, 3 vols (repr.: Berlin, 1974), i.417–18.

There has been no continuity of interpretation on the deeper level: Eriugena, in his speculations concerning the word *theós*, was not participating in a tradition of etymological teaching. We may perhaps think of him as *rediscovering* a bit of Pythagorean doctrine: but this rediscovery was only partial, and presumably fortuitous.

But if etymological inquiry of the kind practised by Eriugena does not shed light on a word's history, and does not reflect the attitudes of a pre-existing tradition, then how are we to view it? Is it simply a verbal game, used to lend vividness to a theoretical exposition? Or does it in fact represent something real, some transhistorical dimension of language?

III

In the search for esoteric theories of etymology, it may be more fruitful to look specifically at sacred languages, understanding by this term those tongues which have been divinely chosen as the direct vehicles of revelation.²³ Greek and Latin, despite their great importance for Christianity, are not sacred in this sense: they became the idioms of ritual and doctrine because secular forces had already given them an international currency, not because it was believed that God had used them to address his people. Hebrew, by contrast, has been seen as a source of revelation by both Jews and Christians.

But when we look to see what the Bible says concerning the giving of names, we find that its message is curiously mixed. In the first chapter of Genesis it is God who names day and night, heaven, earth and seas (1:5, 8, 10); but in the second chapter He brings all His creatures to Adam, 'to see what he would call them: and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof' (2:19). The same Hebrew verb, *qārāh*, is used of the act of naming in both passages. Do names come from God, then, or from man? Do they spring from eternity, or exist within the flow of time?

Modern Biblical criticism holds that the first and second chapters of Genesis are the work of separate authors. This perception is surely

23. For a lucid discussion of this point see Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (3rd ed.: London, 1985), pp. 45–6. I shall not in what follows be considering the tendency, reflected in languages as diverse as Greek, Norse, and Irish, to associate certain words or classes of word with the gods or other supernatural beings. For this phenomenon (mocked by Plato in *Cratylus* 391–2), see Calvert Watkins, 'Language of gods and language of men', in *Myth and Law among the Indo-Europeans*, ed. Jaan Puhvel (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 1–17.

important to our own understanding, but has nothing to do with how the text was interpreted in earlier centuries. Traditional interpreters of the Bible aimed at harmony, rather than analysis: and it is interesting to see that this harmony was achieved, again and again, by making God the ultimate source of every name. Thus the rabbis eventually claimed that Adam, when he named the animals, was in fact divining the names which God had already given to them;²⁴ and the Qur'ān too says that before Adam's naming of all things he had learned their names from God.²⁵ Among Christian writings, the heterodox *Clementine Homilies* go further still: Adam was not only 'the sole true supreme Prophet', but the first of the avatars of Christ, naming His own creations.²⁶

That Adam named the creatures in Hebrew was taken for granted by the Jews, and for the most part by Christians also: only the Chosen People had preserved the language of Eden when human speech was divided at the Tower of Babel. We find an argument to this effect being advanced by Augustine in the fifth century, and echoed by Dante in the fourteenth.²⁷ The essential point to be grasped here is that Hebrew, precisely because it is conceived to be a sacred language, is placed *outside of history*. Immutability of their speech was, in Augustine's eyes, one of God's gifts to the children of Israel: 'This appeared as no small sign of this people's righteousness – that when other nations were punished by the changing of languages, no such affliction came to them'.²⁸

24. Louis Ginzburg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold, 7 vols (Philadelphia, 1909), i.61–3, v.83.

25. Sūra 2, verse 31. For a reconciliation of this text with Genesis 2:19 see Martin Lings, *Symbol and Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 59–60: 'The two scriptures differ simply inasmuch as Genesis is here the more fully informative in telling us that language came to Adam not by any outward revelation through the intermediary of an Archangel but through a no less Providential inward intellection'.

26. Homily 3, chapter 21: Migne, *Patrologia Graeca* ii.124–5.

27. *De ciuitate Dei* xvi.11; *De uulgari eloquentia* i.6. And yet, when Dante ventured to ask Adam himself what language he had used in Eden, he received a different answer: 'The language which I spoke was wholly gone, long before Nimrod's people planned the unfinishable tower The usage of mortals is like a leaf on a branch: it goes, and another comes' (*Paradiso* xxvi.124–6, 137–8). This view is arguably closer to the heart of the Christian revelation, for which the Word is a Person rather than a form of speech, and all human languages have been consecrated by the Spirit.

28. *Loc. cit.* For an exhaustive treatment of this theme, see the four volumes of Arno Borst's *Der Turmbau von Babel* (Stuttgart, 1957–63).

A language not subject to time is a language without etymology: for etymology is nothing other than the study of how words have changed. And so attempts to find 'deeper' meanings in Hebrew words have looked not into their past, but at their possible permutations in the present, rearranging or transforming their letters according to the numerological techniques known as *gematria*. The fundamental constituents of the language, the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, antedate the universe itself. In the words of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, or *Book of Creation*:

Twenty-two letter-elements: [God] outlined them, hewed them out, weighed them, combined them, and exchanged them, and through them created the soul of all creation and everything else that was ever to be created.... And thus it results that everything created and everything spoken issue from one name.²⁹

The case is similar for Islam: since the archetypal Qur'ān, the 'Mother of Books' or 'Guarded Tablet', was inscribed by God as the essence of His creative act, therefore the Arabic language (and Arabic calligraphy) must have existed since the beginning of the cosmos.³⁰ The interrelationships of Arabic words cannot, then, be explained in terms of an earlier history, for they have always been exactly the same. Rather, 'according to *al-jaf*r ("the science of letters")', the words which are formed from the same letters arranged in different orders all spring from the same "Pythagorean number" and therefore from the same idea'. Thus the three roots RFQ 'joining', FRQ 'separation', and FQR 'dependence', differing from one another in their surface sense, can be brought together on the level of esoteric interpretation.³¹ Like etymology, this system creates a web of often startling verbal associations; but it is one which has nothing to do with time.

In India *nirukta* (literally 'clear utterance, explanation'), or the lore of the derivations of words, is one of the six disciplines traditionally

29. Cited by Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1965), p. 168. For a concise discussion of the place of *gematria* in Jewish thought see the same author's *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 337-43.

30. Thus for instance Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art and Spirituality* (Ipswich, 1987), p. 17.

31. Titus Burckhardt, *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays in Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, trans. William Stoddart (Cambridge, 1987), p. 240 n. 6. Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam* (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), p. 598.

considered to supplement the study of the Vedas. Inquiry of this kind began very early: the oldest surviving Sanskrit text apart from the Vedas themselves is a treatise on *nirukta* by Yāska (seventh century BC?), who 'already quotes no less than seventeen predecessors, whose opinions frequently contradict each other'.³² For Yāska, as for other practitioners of pre-modern etymology, there is nothing paradoxical in the idea that a single word may have several origins.

Here too the traditional study of sacred language has taken it to be axiomatic that 'the utterance of names and the appearance of the worlds is simultaneous, and, strictly speaking, eternal'.³³ The divinity whom the *Rgveda* calls 'the name-giver of the gods' is Viśvakarman, maker of all things (x.82.3); and it is said that 'when the ancient dawns shone, the great word (*akṣara*, "imperishable") was born', 'that great secret name, desired by many, by which you wish to generate what was and is to be: a light engendered long ago' (iii.55.1, x.55.2). That the archetypal 'secret names' (*nāmāni guhyā*, viii.41.5) are in fact the words of the Vedas is made explicit in another passage, where the Vedic metres are employed to frame both the hymns and the universe itself (i.164.24–5, 39):

By means of *gāyatrī* he constructs the song, by means of the song the hymn, by means of *triṣṭubh* the utterance, by means of the utterance the couplet, the quatrain; by means of the word (*akṣara*) they construct the seven metres. By means of *jagatī* he suspended the waters in the sky; by means of *ratham̐tara* he beheld the sun . . . It is upon the word (*akṣara*) of the *Rgveda*, upon the loftiest heaven, that all the gods have seated themselves.

Nirukta is concerned not with standard Sanskrit, but only with the language of the Vedas – those primary scriptures which, as the unmediated utterances of divinity, are spoken of as 'what is heard' (*śruti*), to distinguish them from the 'what is remembered' (*smṛti*) of mere human tradition. Thus Usha Choudhuri has insisted that 'the principle of derivation or etymology (*Nirukti*) was not meant for the words of common speech but for the words used in the poetic hymns

32. Maurice Winternitz, *A History of Indian Literature*, trans. S. Ketkar, 2 vols (repr.: New Delhi, 1977), i.69–70; cf. pp. 287–8.

33. A. K. Coomaraswamy, 'Vedic exemplarism', in *Coomaraswamy*, ed. Roger Lipsey, 3 vols (Princeton, 1977), ii.179–97: p. 193.

of the Vedas';³⁴ and Yāska himself described the subject matter of *nirukta* as 'having been gathered together from the Vedas; [and], once gathered together, handed down'.³⁵

For Vedic Sanskrit, then, as for Hebrew and Arabic, the traditional study of words has nothing to do with their 'history', denying indeed the very possibility that such a history could exist. And *gematria*, *al-jafri*, and *nirukta* are each concerned with a single language only: there is no question of any of these techniques finding an application beyond the sacred sphere. From this standpoint, then, it could be argued that the intuitive approach to the origins of English words with which I began this essay runs counter not only to the principles of academic etymology, but to those of esoteric etymology as well.

IV

There is, however, another way in which we can think about the essences of words: by seeing the *whole* of human speech as a vehicle for the Spirit, and all of the transformations of language as a field in which Eternity can be made manifest. It is intriguing to observe Harold Bayley, after he had filled two volumes with historical speculations of the kind which I have quoted above, ending his book by invoking a Reality which transcended time:

Poets have from all time claimed to be the Tongues of an Unseen World, the custodians of an inner certainty, of a Knowledge standing behind and apart from evidence, and of an Understanding that makes darkness light . . . Although every scruple of due weight may be given to the force of Memory . . . there are manifold problems in Literature that are insoluble except by the supposition that the mind is at times played upon by the fingers of an Unseen Force.³⁶

This idea was further developed, in rather more restrained language, by A. K. Coomaraswamy in an article first published in 1936. Basing his remarks mainly on the Vedic doctrine of names, and also on certain statements in the *Cratylus*,³⁷ Coomaraswamy distinguished between an *etymological* interest in the antecedents of words in historical time,

34. *Vedic Mythopoeia: An Approach to Religion, Myth and Poetry* (New Delhi, 1983), p. 81.

35. The Sanskrit is cited by Choudhuri, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

36. *Lost Language of Symbolism*, ii. 359–60.

and a *hermeneutic* concern with their basis in a non-temporal (and hence ever-present) eternity:

What this amounts to is the conception of a single living language, not knowable in its entirety by any individual principle but in itself the sum of all imaginable articulations, and in the same way corresponding to all imaginable acts of being: the 'Spoken Word' of God is precisely this 'sum of all language' All existing languages are partially remembered and more or less fragmented echoes of this universal tongue

This is, then, a perspective which affirms the principal kinship of all languages without invoking untenable historical theories. Indeed, 'the metaphysical doctrine of universal language is . . . by no means to be thought of as asserting that a universal language was ever actually spoken by any people under the sun.'³⁸ If such a language stands outside time entirely, then it is perennially immanent: to 'remember' it is not to recover some dim shadow of remote antiquity, but to 'recollect' in the Platonic sense. Being unaging, it is ever new. Every stage in every individual language's historical development can, each in its own way, reflect the plenitude of the transcendent Word.³⁹

I am not aware that what Coomaraswamy calls 'the metaphysical doctrine of universal language' is actually articulated in any of the sacred traditions. Even if it is not stated explicitly, however, there is much to suggest it: all over the world there are peoples who have believed that their languages came to them from the gods, or that they once had the same speech as the beasts and birds.⁴⁰ Christianity

37. It must be said that Coomaraswamy's citations of the *Cratylus* appear to me to be taken out of context, in a way which sometimes distorts Plato's sense. Thus he assigns particular importance to Cratylus's statement that the first giver of names must have been 'a power more than human' (438c): but this represents a viewpoint explicitly rejected elsewhere in the dialogue by Socrates himself (425d).

38. '*Nirukta* = *hermeneia*', reprinted in *Coomaraswamy*, ii.256–62: pp. 260–1.

39. This is not to say that a language is equally open to such epiphany, or equally capable of expressing it, at every stage in its history. Languages can be diminished and degraded, as is all too evident in our own day. At such times, most of a language's potency may indeed lie buried in its past; but even then, the Spirit is always ready to breathe into it anew.

40. The most vivid expression of the latter notion which is known to me occurs in the medieval Irish cosmological treatise known as *The Ever-new Tongue*. This work contains several specimens of what purports to be the language 'in which the angels speak, and every rank of heaven. And sea-creatures and beasts and cattle and birds and serpents

teaches the sanctification of all human language in the miracle of Pentecost, when the curse of Babel was undone and the Holy Spirit, in Augustine's words, 'was speaking in the tongues of all races'.⁴¹

There are inspiring possibilities here. Are they more than possibilities? It seems to me that the resemblances of words which are not etymologically akin should be placed in the same category as those patterns of tea leaves and sacrificial entrails, of stars and scattered yarrow stalks, in which various peoples have undertaken to read the shape of destiny. Time after time, real wisdom has been drawn from such messages: this is true whether one attributes the insight to divine agency, to the mind's inspiration when confronted by random data, or to the statistical action of blind chance. For those who believe in the supernatural efficacy of oracles, a transcendent Reality is constantly communicating with us – if we have eyes to see, and ears to hear. It is also a part of such belief, however, that the oracles are not true under all circumstances, and that only some can read them: hermeneutic interpretation, no less than academic philology, must be guided by prudence, reverence, and discrimination.

It is not the purpose of this essay either to affirm or to reject the doctrine of a universal, extratemporal language. I merely wish to argue that, if one wishes to identify with one another words which have no demonstrable historical relationship, only such a doctrine will provide a basis for doing so.

We are the children of transience: our imaginations cannot grasp eternity. This is why myths – those events which, in the words of the philosopher Sallustius, 'never were, and always are'⁴² – are said to have happened 'once upon a time', when in truth they exist beyond all time. The error of fundamentalism lies in its attempt to crush the symbol, to freeze and flatten the archetypal deeds of myth into the schematic chronology of history books. It is idolatry.

This idolatry of time, this fundamentalist desire to chain the numinous Origin to some fixed point in the past, can also seduce us as we ponder the mysteries of words. Let us, by all means, seek to attune our ears to the clues and echoes of wisdom which are scattered through-

and demons understand it, and all will speak it at the Judgment' (translated in John Carey, *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (2nd ed.: Dublin, 2000), p. 79).

41. *Sermo lxxi*; Migne, *Patrologia Latina* xxxviii.461.

42. *Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, ed. and trans. A. D. Nock (repr.: Hildesheim, 1966), p. 8 (my translation).

out the languages of mankind. But we should not – unless, of course, the testimony of a very different kind of knowing points in the same direction – seek to project such inspirations backward, into the dead reaches of what has been.
