

HIEROGLYPHS, REAL CHARACTERS, AND THE IDEA OF NATURAL LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

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Hieroglyphs at the Dawn of the Age of Reason

“*Hieroglyphick!* What meanest thou by that?” asks a character in Ben Jonson’s play, *The Case is Altered*.¹ During the Renaissance and well into the seventeenth century, this question posed a very different kind of problem than it would pose for the next three hundred years. For example, the sixteenth-century French printer and scholar, Henry Estienne, traces the origin of the hieroglyphs to the world’s first garden. They “do derive . . . from God himselfe, . . . he is the first author of them, since he planted the Tree of Life, or rather the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the terrestrial Paradise, explaining by these words, NE COMEDAS [DO NOT EAT].”² Presumably, this explanation of the meaning of the world’s first hieroglyph was woefully insufficient, for Adam and Eve did eat. And in fact, the meaning of the hieroglyphs remained perplexing, though not thereafter with such disastrous consequences, from the time of our first parents until the early nineteenth century when Champollion published his discovery of the key to their decipherment in the *Précis du système hiéroglyphique* (1824).

But by the time of Champollion, hieroglyphs meant something quite different than they had meant for Ben Jonson and his contemporaries. During the early seventeenth century the Egyptian hieroglyphs were not

¹ Ben Jonson, *The Case is Altered*, I, iv, 8; in *Works*, ed. C. H. Hereford and Percy Simpson (Oxford, 1925-52), vol. III, 110. The answer the question receives is: “what? stand upon meaning with your freinds [sic]? Puh, *Abconde*.”

² Estienne, *Art of Making Devises*, tr. Thomas Blount (London, 1648), 16. Estienne is speaking of “devises” rather than of hieroglyphs proper. On Renaissance hieroglyphs, see especially, Karl Giehlow, “Die Hieroglyphenkunde des Humanismus in der Allegorie der Renaissance,” *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhaus*, 32 (1915), 1-218; also Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen, 1961), Ch. III, 57-87; E. H. Gombrich, “*Icones Symbolicae: The Visual Image in Neoplatonic Thought*,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 11 (1948), 163-92 (rpt. in an expanded version as “*Icones Symbolicae: Philosophies of Symbolism and their Bearings on Art*,” in *Symbolic Images* [New York, 1978], 123-95); Rudolf Wittkower, “Hieroglyphs in the Early Renaissance,” *Developments in the Early Renaissance*, ed. Bernard S. Levy (Albany, 1972); G. Boas, *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo* (New York, 1950); Don Cameron Allen, “The Symbolic Wisdom of the Ancient Egyptians,” *Mysteriously Meant* (Baltimore, 1970), ch. V, 107-33; and Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis, 1970).

yet a distant and enigmatic chapter in the history of the development of writing. Rather, these sacred symbols then served to unify an entire complex of ideas about the origins and transmission of Western thought, the nature and limits of symbolic expression, and the structure of the natural world.

Seventeenth-century thinkers never understood how the Egyptian symbols worked because they were unaware of the phonetic basis of the script. They did think that they understood how they worked as allegorical figures and thereby supposed that they could create their own hieroglyphic symbols. Indeed, like the men of antiquity, they seem almost cavalier in their willing ignorance of what real Egyptian hieroglyphs actually looked like. But this was not because they were not looking carefully enough or because their vision was clouded with an ethnocentric bias that we moderns have overcome, but only because they were looking for other things.³ The most important difference between Champollion and the men of the seventeenth century in their attitude toward the hieroglyphs was that for the former they composed a problem for historical linguistics, a problem of decipherment, while for the latter they were a philosophical problem, a problem of representation. And this shift suggests why the hieroglyphs are now an object of special interest to twentieth-century thinkers. As the focus of language study has moved from historical linguistics to the philosophy of language and to semiotics, seventeenth-century thought about the hieroglyphs offers an early and crucial chapter in the development of modern ideas about symbolic representation.

The most important role that the hieroglyphs played in defining the relation between symbolic expression and the order of the world was in furthering ideas about a natural language. When referring to natural language, modern linguists generally use the term as a synonym for ordinary language; that is, they use it to distinguish between particular instances of language use and the common mental processes that structure language as a whole, or to distinguish between actual spoken languages and any artificial or universal languages that might be created. This is not the seventeenth-century conception of a natural language. In a tautology common to the period a natural language was a language that could best express the nature of things. The actual spoken languages were considered to be the artificial and corrupt products of the misuse of words by the common people. These everyday languages were “unnatural,” for they obscured the order of things.⁴

The conception of what constituted a natural language changed dra-

³ Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, tr. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), 80.

⁴ For example, G. A. Padley, in *Grammatical Theory in Western Europe, 1500-1700: The Latin Tradition* (Cambridge, 1976), 139, on John Webster.

matically during the course of the late Renaissance and the seventeenth century, and this change was mirrored by the changing attitudes toward the hieroglyphs. While early humanists conceived of a natural language as being related in some way to the language spoken by Adam in the Garden of Eden and to animal symbolism, many proponents of a natural language during the mid-seventeenth century conceived of it either as a universal language that might be understood by all men or as a philosophical language made up of "real characters," whose composition would mirror the composition of and relation between the things of the world. But different as these conceptions are, they are held together by the idea that a natural language is the script in which the created world is written, and by which the artist, the theologian, the philosopher, and the scientist can rewrite it. Moreover, they are held together by the example of the Egyptian hieroglyphs; for it is not a historical accident that when the hieroglyphic tradition disappeared, so too did the late-Renaissance and the seventeenth-century idea of a natural language.

During late antiquity Neoplatonists like Plotinus and Iamblichus gave to the hieroglyphs a definite place in the hierarchy of representation, with the result that henceforth the Western fascination with the sacred symbols of the Egyptians tended to grow and wane in tandem with interest in Neoplatonism.⁵ When this philosophical school faded away in the sixth century, interest in hieroglyphs dimmed equally until both were resurrected in fifteenth-century Florence. Similarly, in the late seventeenth century when Neoplatonism once more ceased to be an important philosophical school, the hieroglyphic tradition shared its fate. Already by the year 1600 Renaissance Neoplatonism and the hieroglyphic tradition were becoming objects of skepticism, derision, or, worst of all, disinterest. The Neoplatonists of late antiquity had passed on to the Renaissance the idea that the hieroglyphs were an esoteric system of sacred symbols that revealed and could be used to express the Ideas of God. Since the new age was increasingly disinterested in the Renaissance conception of the Ideas of God, it had little use for nor much interest in such symbols.

In the *Advancement of Learning* (1605) Sir Francis Bacon suggests that the Egyptians did not use hieroglyphs to conceal their wisdom but only because they were incapable of expressing themselves otherwise given the primitive state of their learning. Bacon's theory of the origin of hieroglyphic writing was to be as important for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as Plotinus's remarks in the *Enneads* had been for late antiquity and the Renaissance. More than anyone else, he marks the beginning of the end of the hieroglyphic tradition.

Bacon says that "as hieroglyphics were before letters, so parables were before arguments." This is not, as Italian Renaissance scholars like

⁵ See Plotinus, *Enneads*, V, viii, 5-6 and Iamblichus, *Egyptian Mysteries*, VII, i; on Plotinus, see Boas, *Hieroglyphics*, 28.

Valeriano thought, because secret wisdom needed to be concealed from the vulgar. To the contrary, “the cause was, for that it was then of necessity to express any point of reason which was more sharp or subtile than the vulgar in that manner, because men in those times wanted both variety of examples and subtilty of conceit. . . .”⁶ Bacon’s point is perfectly clear. The ancients used this form of writing not because their wisdom was superior to that of the moderns but because it was inferior. Simply put, they were lacking in “subtily of conceit.”

But Bacon’s critique of the hieroglyphic tradition is much more than a corollary to his advancement of the new learning. Bacon’s ideas about the Egyptian symbols played an important role in his ideas about the problem of language. The consequences of his critique were enormous, especially for the members and friends of the Royal Society, and it became influential in ways that Bacon himself could not have envisioned.

Sir Francis Bacon: Hieroglyphs and the Problem of Language

Sir Francis Bacon’s remarks on language in *The New Organon* and *The Advancement of Learning* are familiar, of course, to scholars of the period. But they bear repeating by way of establishing the terms in which the problem of language was formulated and possible solutions were proposed. Bacon writes that among the different idols whose worship prevents men from advancing knowledge

the *Idols of the Marketplace* are the most troublesome of all—idols which have crept into the understanding through the alliance of words and names. For men believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding; and this it is that has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophistical and inactive. Now words, being commonly framed and applied according to the capacity of the vulgar, follow those lines of division which are the most obvious to the vulgar understanding. And whenever an understanding of greater acuteness or a more diligent observation would alter those lines to suit the true division of nature, words stand in the way and resist the change. . . . [E]ven definitions cannot cure this evil in dealing with natural and material

⁶ Bacon, *Advancement of Learning*, ed. G. W. Kitchin (New York, 1915), 83. The context for Bacon’s remarks on the hieroglyphs is “paraboliſal wiſdom.” Valeriano writes in the *Hieroglyphica* (Lyons, 1602; rpt. in fac. New York, 1976), “Epistola nuncupatoria,” 3r: “cum Assertor noster ait: *Aperiam in parabolis os meum, & in aenigmate antiqua loquar, quid aliud sibi voluit, quam hieroglyphice sermonem faciam, & et allegorice vetusta rerum proferam monumenta?*” Cf. Martin Elsky, “Bacon’s Hieroglyphs and the Separation of Words and Things,” *Philological Quarterly*, 64 (1984), 449-60; and Paolo Rossi, “Hermeticism, Rationality and the Scientific Revolution,” 256-59, in *Reason, Experiment and Mysticism in the Scientific Revolution*, eds. M. L. Righini Bonelli and William R. Shea (New York, 1975).

things, since the definitions themselves consist of words, and those words beget others.⁷

Here, Bacon argues that the uncritical use of language has led men to assume that the “lines of division” that articulate the meanings of words correspond to “the true division of nature.” Nothing could be further from the truth, according to Bacon. Everyday language is not isomorphic with nature, and while “men believe that their reason governs words,” the converse is the more accurate; for our understanding is not free to think or to express itself however it likes but is governed by the words that give it form. In this passage Bacon seems to doubt that this misalliance between words and things can ever be rectified so that the divisions of language might correspond to the divisions of nature, although elsewhere he does suggest ways whereby this might be accomplished.

In a passage from *The Advancement of Learning* that leads up to his discussion of the Egyptian hieroglyphs, Bacon proposes that our understanding does not necessarily have to be expressed by spoken language or an alphabetic script: “For *whatsoever is capable of sufficient differences, and those perceptible by the sense, is in nature competent to express cogitations.*” To support his statement Bacon points to the examples of the “commerce of barbarous people” and the “dumb and deaf,” both of whom communicate their needs and ideas by gestures, which he will later call “transitory hieroglyphics.” Bacon adduces the further example of the Chinese characters, which can be read by the Chinese themselves in their language and by other Orientals, the Japanese, for instance, in theirs:

it is the use of China, and the kingdoms of the high Levant [i.e., the Far East], to write in characters real, which express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions; insomuch as countries and provinces, which understand not one another’s languages, can nevertheless read one another’s writings. . . ; and therefore they have a vast multitude of characters, as many, I suppose, as radical words.

Bacon’s comments proved to be far more influential than his sketchy treatment would suggest. By real characters Bacon means characters that “express neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions,” that is, non-alphabetic symbols that do not refer to any particular spoken language. Also, Bacon supposes that each of the Chinese real characters signifies a “radical word,” an atomistic unit of meaning.

Bacon then distinguishes between two kinds of “notes of cogitations” or non-alphabetical systems of writing. The first is “*ad placitum*, having force only by contract or acceptation,” like the Chinese. The second is

⁷ Bacon, *New Organon*, bk. I, Aphorism LIX, in *Philosophical Works*, ed. John M. Robertson (London, 1905).

ex congruo, “when the note hath some similitude or congruity with the notion.” Of this second kind are hieroglyphs and gestures:

For as to hieroglyphics, things of ancient use, and embraced chiefly by the Egyptians, one of the most ancient nations, they are but as continued impresses and emblems. And as for gestures, they are transitory hieroglyphics, and are to hieroglyphics as words spoken are [to] written, in that they abide not; but they have evermore, as well as the other, an affinity with the thing signified. . . .⁸

As I mentioned above, Bacon sees the hieroglyphs as belonging to a time when men were lacking in “subtily of conceit.” The Egyptians’ means of expression was on a par with their level of knowledge. And the comparison here with gestures shows the way in which Bacon would concede that they might form a natural language. They are natural as the throwing up of the hands is a natural sign of exasperation or a grimace is the natural sign of pain. There is no question of their being natural in the way that the Adamic language, through its essential link between word and thing, was thought to express the nature of things. In fact Bacon seems to deny the possibility that any historical language might have been natural in this way: “although some have derived [the] imposition of names from reason or intendment; a speculation elegant, and by reason it searcheth into antiquity, reverent: but sparingly mixt with truth, and of small fruit.”⁹ Although Bacon may be referring directly to the ideas about the origins of language expressed in Plato’s *Cratylus*, his denial that names were ever imposed “from reason or intendment” also calls into question the traditional Christian doctrine of Adamic naming.

Bacon’s remarks about the “Notes of Things” and the Idols of the Marketplace, however tentative and however he meant them to be taken, read like a prospectus of the debates about real characters and universal or philosophical languages during the seventeenth century. He places the misalliance between words and things in the context of new knowledge being hindered by old language. He argues that the old language has been determined by the use of the vulgar, thus suggesting that a reformation of language by those “of greater acuteness or a more diligent observation” might be possible. That is, his assertion that, historically, names were never imposed on things “from reason or intendment,” introduces the question of how language did originate and leaves open the possibility that a rational and calculated language might be created in the future. He suggests that language should be in some way isomorphic with nature, that its “lines of division” should correspond to “the true division of nature.” As an example of a method of communication that does not involve alphabetic language, he points to real characters based

⁸ *Advancement of Learning*, ed. Kitchin, 137.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

on “radical words.” Here he is referring to the Chinese characters, but his successors would keep the idea of symbols that directly expressed “things or notions” without necessarily having the Oriental example foremost in mind.

As for the hieroglyphs, his radical reevaluation of them is determined by his rejection of the doctrine of the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians. The sacred symbols are a primitive form of writing belonging to a primitive time, a time when men were lacking in “subtlety of conceit.” But by virtue of following his discussion of real characters with his remarks on the hieroglyphs, he insured the Egyptian symbols a place in the seventeenth-century debate about a universal or philosophical language. Because Bacon emphasizes sensory evidence and because the hieroglyphs are “*perceptible by the sense*,” designating their referents through their immediate “similitude or congruity with the notion,” they have a special linguistic value. Bacon is mistrustful of mere words. The hieroglyphs, however, do not signify through the mediation of words. Rather, they directly point to a thing or an idea because “they have evermore . . . an affinity with the thing signified.” Hence, it is not surprising that language projectors later in the seventeenth century follow Bacon in rejecting the doctrine of the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians while often pointing to the hieroglyphs as a model and inspiration in the construction of new systems to represent their new learning and ideas.¹⁰ Like Bacon, they are mistrustful of words and they seek a system of writing that makes visual sense.

Universal and Philosophical Languages

The model of the hieroglyphs inspired thought about the possibility of a universal language long before Bacon discussed the Egyptian symbols together with real characters, as the examples of such Renaissance men like Leon Battista Alberti and Francesco Colonna show.¹¹ But by the

¹⁰ See Lia Formigari in “Linguistic Theories in British Seventeenth-Century Philosophy,” *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), III, 74.

¹¹ See Alberti, *De re aedificatoria* (1485), tr. James Leoni (London, 1726), 59v and 60r (Bk. VIII, Ch. IV); and for Colonna, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili: Edizione critica e commento*, 2 vols., eds. Giovanni Pozzi and Lucia A. Ciapponni (Padua, 1964). The distinction between a first phase of interest in a real character as a universal language and a second as a philosophical language was first proposed by Benjamin DeMott, “The Sources and Development of John Wilkins’ Philosophical Language,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 57 (1958), 10. See Vivian Salmon, “Language-Planning in Seventeenth-Century England,” *In Memory of J. R. Firth*, ed. C. E. Bazell et al. (London, 1966), 2; James Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes in England and France: 1600-1800* (Toronto, 1975), 70; M. M. Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1982), 126; and especially Murray Cohen, “From the Lexical to the Syntactic,” *Sensible Words: Linguistic Practice in England, 1640-1785* (Baltimore, 1977), 25-30.

time of Bacon, traditional Renaissance symbolism was no longer the stuff of which a universal language could be composed. Still, elements from the Renaissance conception of the hieroglyphs, in particular the idea of “silent” or non-alphabetical characters that made visual sense, remained influential in the new intellectual context. That the hieroglyphic tradition could continue to play an important role during the seventeenth century may seem strange, but as Frances Yates reminds us: “Renaissance methods and aims merge into seventeenth-century methods and aims and the seventeenth-century reader did not distinguish the modern aspects of the age so sharply as we do. For him the methods of Bacon or Descartes were just two more of such things.”¹² During the first half of the seventeenth century hieroglyphs and “real characters” were often conceived as two related methods for an improved representation of knowledge. While the real characters may now seem, in retrospect, to be more in tune with the new spirit of the age, this was in no way apparent to the men of the time, who often looked at the real characters as improved hieroglyphs.

In fact the comparison to the Egyptian hieroglyphs of the new proposals for, or schemes of, a universal language is more the rule than the exception. In 1627 Jean Douet insists that the universal language he is proposing to the French king “imitates or rather surpasses the Egyptians hieroglyphs. . . .”¹³ Philip Kinder, writing to William Beveridge in 1628, calls his universal character a “Trismegisticall invention.”¹⁴ Descartes’s friend Father Mersenne calls the characters that Reverend Johnson is working on in Ireland during the 1630s “hieroglyphics.”¹⁵ John Wilkins, in his *Mercury, or The Secret and Swift Messenger* of 1641, prefaces his call for “an universal character to express things and notions” with a discussion of the hieroglyphs.¹⁶ The example of the mystical symbols of the Egyptians influences young Isaac Newton when he makes notes on a universal character while studying at Cambridge in 1661.¹⁷ In the same

¹² Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago, 1964), 378.

¹³ Douet, *Proposition présentée au roy, d’une écriture universelle* (Paris, 1627); quoted in Knowlson, *Universal Language Schemes*, 19; and briefly discussed by Madeleine V.-David, *Le Débat sur les écritures et l’hieroglyphe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1965), 36-37.

¹⁴ Beveridge letter, 14 January, 1628, Bodleian Library, Oxford, Ashmolean MS 788, ff50v; quoted by Vivian Salmon, *Works of Francis Lodwick* (London, 1972), 91.

¹⁵ Mersenne, *Correspondence*, ed. De Waard (1932; Paris, 1970), XI, 418.

¹⁶ Wilkins, *Mercury*, rpt. in *The Mathematical and Philosophical Works* (London, 1708), Ch. XII, 50-52: “. . . the Egyptians were wont to express their minds, by the pictures of such creatures as did bear in them some *natural resemblance* to the thing intended” (51, emphasis mine).

¹⁷ See Ralph W. V. Elliott, “Isaac Newton’s ‘Of an Universall Language,’” *The Modern Language Review*, 52 (1957), 1-18, where the MS is reprinted. The MS begins: “The Dialects of each Language being soe divers & arbitrary A generall Language cannot bee so fitly deduced from them as from *y^e natures of things* w^{ch} is *y^e* same to all Nations

year the frontispiece of Johann Becher's *Character, pro notitia linguarum universali* emphasizes the derivation of universal language projects from the hieroglyphic tradition by showing his characters inscribed on an Egyptian obelisk. And in 1663 the great Egyptologist, Athanasius Kircher, publishes his *Polygraphia nova et universalis et combinatoria arte detecta*, in which he shows that his interest in the hieroglyphs has led him to develop an interest in both cryptographic and universal characters.

The earliest surviving attempt in England at working out a real character was Francis Lodwick's *A Common Writing, whereby two, although not understanding one the others Language, yet by the helpe thereof, may communicate their minds to one another* (1647). In his address "To the Reader" Lodwick explains "that this writing hath no reference to letters, or their Conjunctions in words, but being rather a kind of hieroglyphical representation of words, by so many severall Characters, for each word a Character, and that not at Random. . . ." Of course Lodwick's characters look even less like Egyptian hieroglyphs than did Colonna's Renaissance creations. And yet it remains a question "of a kind of hieroglyphical representation of words."

Here "hieroglyphical" means something more than non-alphabetic, for Lodwick's characters are also like the Egyptian symbols in that they are "not at Random." This is the crucial moment in the debates about language projects, for Lodwick's remarks show why the artificial characters of a seventeenth-century philosophical language remain a "hieroglyphical" natural language. The characters of Lodwick's universal language compose a natural language because they express the nature of things. The linguistic signs of a real character can be artificial or conventional without being "at Random" because the order of their composition mirrors the structure of nature. Their linguistic value is insured because they serve as symbols for the order of things, and this order presents itself *naturally* to the mind.

During the seventeenth century the connection between words and things in a natural language could not be "at Random," but it was not necessarily essential or substantive, as Renaissance Neoplatonists generally thought. Such an essential link might exist, as was indeed conceived to be the case with the Adamic language or with the hieroglyphs while the latter remained tied to the tradition of the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians. But this essentialist link between words and things was no longer the defining characteristic of a natural language. Rather, a natural language could be grounded on the natural picturing of the order of things by the mind. This language would be natural so long as its artificial characters were "not at Random," that is, if the composition of its elements mirrored the natural order of mental signs.

& by w^{ch} all Language was at first composed" (7, emphasis mine). For Newton and the hieroglyphs, see Salmon, *Works of Lodwick*, 147.

The Webster-Ward-Wilkins Debate

The Webster-Ward-Wilkins debate confirms the place of the hieroglyphs in mid-seventeenth-century discussions of the language problem. In 1654 the Puritan John Webster attacked both the academic curricula and methods of teaching in the English universities in *The Examination of Academies* and was answered in the *Vindiciae academiarum* by Seth Ward, the professor of astronomy at Oxford, with the help of John Wilkins, a founding member of the Royal Society and that body's most influential supporter of the development of a real character.¹⁸ In the third chapter of his *Examination* Webster divides "Humane Learning" into its "*Speculative* and *Practick*" branches, remarks upon the difficulties of learning and teaching "Tongues or Languages," and then discusses three privileged languages, the hieroglyphs, a universal language composed of real characters, and "the pure language of nature" that Adam spoke in the Garden of Eden. All three have different characteristics, but all three are varieties of a natural language as the men of his time understood the concept.

Among the "sorts of Symbolisms," Webster first discusses the "*Hieroglyphicks*," declaring them to be "probable, pleasant and useful," and notes that they are "not onely antient, but in and by them what great mysteries have been preserved and holden out to the world?" (24) The special advantages of the hieroglyphs as a means of symbolic representation follow from the nature of the created world, for "every creature ['in the great unsealed book of God' is] as a Capital letter or character," (28); indeed, "all these things are so many significant and lively characters, or *Hieroglyphicks* of his invisible power, providence, and divine wisdom . . ." (19). The book of the world was written by God in a script of "significant and lively" hieroglyphs.

Webster then calls for "the discovery of the universal character" whose "characters, which are real, not nominal, [would express] neither letters nor words, but things and notions." Such a discovery would be "a potent means . . . to have repaired the ruines of *Babell*" (25) and "a vast advancement . . . to the Re-publick of Learning" (24). His remarks recall, of course, Francis Bacon, whose Latin edition of *The Advancement of Learning* is cited in the margin when Webster, following Bacon again, points to the example of the characters used in the Far East. As an example of a real character, Webster proposes that the idea "man" could have as its mark an asterisk. Although the words signifying "man" are different in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, High German, Spanish, and English, to cite the examples he gives, if they were replaced by this

¹⁸ *Science and Education in the Seventeenth Century: The Webster-Ward Debate*, ed. Allen Debus (London, 1970), in which both *The Examination of Academies* and the *Vindiciae academiarium* are reproduced in facsimile.

common character “yet would the intellect receive but only the single and numerical species of that which it [the asterisk] represented, and so one note serve for one notion to all nations” (26).

Webster concludes the chapter with a long discussion of “the pure language of Nature,” which he places within the tradition of “*Paradisical* language . . . which *Adam* understood while he was unfaln in *Eden*,” “but . . . [is] now lost, defac’t and forgotten” by “sinfull man” (27). Webster admits that some will find this doctrine “fabulous, impossible, or ridiculous” (26). Although he cites “the mysterious and divinely-inspired Teutonic,” Jacob Boehme, from whom he borrows much of his mystical terminology, his notion of the Adamic language is much the same as that of the Renaissance Neoplatonists. Webster argues that “the pure language of nature” “[was] infused into him [Adam] in his Creation, and so innate or implanate in him, and not inventive or acquisitive, but meerly dative from the father of light . . .” (29). Obviously enough, unlike a real character, Webster conceives that the restoration of the Adamic language would have to be a direct gift of God. The asterisk that he proposes might be used as a universal sign for “man” is “inventive or acquisitive”; it is an artificial sign standing as a mark for an idea, not a sign “dative” from God or the logos.

When Ward and Wilkins respond in their defense of the universities, even before they come to a point by point rebuttal of Webster’s third chapter, they pause in their introduction to address two of his ideas that they find particularly egregious:

What a loose and wild kind of vapouring is that *Cap. 3* about . . . the *universall Character* wherein he [Webster] supposes the Universities to be wholly ignorant, *none of them having so much as touched at these things.* pag. 24

But above all, the man doth give me the freest prospect of his depth and braine, in that canting Discourse about the language of nature, . . . which may sufficiently convince what a kind of credulous fanatick Reformer he is like to prove. [5]

From the very beginning Ward and Wilkins are quick to show that the universities are indeed working on a universal character, but they are equally quick to deny that the construction of a real character has anything to do with the restoration of the Adamic language. While both are natural languages as the men of the seventeenth century understood the term, the linguistic value of the former rests upon the doctrine of the natural signs of the mind, with which they concur, while the linguistic value of the latter rests upon the doctrine of an essential link between spoken words and things, which they reject entirely.

To Webster’s “pure language of Nature” they react with scorn and a devastating parody of his mystical terminology (22-23). But they are not willing to abandon the ideal of a natural language: “Such a language as this (where every word were a definition and contained the nature of the thing) might not injustly be termed a naturall Language, and would

afford that which the *Cabalists* and *Rosycrucians* have vainly sought for in the Hebrew, And in the names assigned by *Adam*, which *M. Webster* . . . would bring under . . . [grammatical] *Laws* . . .” (22). This natural language will not be “dative from the father of light.” Rather, it will be “inventive or acquisitive,” the product of the scientific discovery of “the true division of nature” to which Bacon referred. Although its elemental signs will be artificial, their composition will reflect the composition of elements in the natural world.

Ward and Wilkins offer this explanation of the working of a natural language in which “every word were a definition and contained the nature of the thing”:

by the helpe of Logick and Mathematicks this might soone receive a mighty advantage, for all Discourse being resolved in sentences, those into words, words signifying either simple notions or being resoluble into simple notions, it is manifest, that if all the sorts of simple notions be found out, and have Symboles assigned to them, those [the characters of this “philosophical” approach to a real character] will be extremely few in respect to the other [assigning symbols to “radical words”] . . . and yet will represent to the very eye all the elements of their composition, & so deliver the natures of things: and exact discourses may be made demonstratively without any other paines then is used in the operations of specious Analyties. [21]

Thereby, Ward and Wilkins contend, “names will be made up of the definitions of things, or a complexion of all those notions, whereof a Complexe is compounded, every single notion being expressed by one syllable.” The natural language conceived by Ward and Wilkins is grounded in a variation of the metaphysics of the simple. “Simple notions” present themselves naturally and unproblematically to the mind. They are what is essential. Their natural language mirrors the composition of these natural symbols. The difference between their metaphysics of the simple and other variants of this doctrine since the seventeenth century is that their “simple notions” are already written in a taxonomic grammar. Their Creator-God is an Aristotelian.

This ideal of a philosophical language whose discourse would imitate the discourse of nature assumes that the natural order is divisible into “specious Analyties,” that is, that the analysis of genera will result in the discovery of species, which are, as it were, the atoms of nature; and that, similarly, the discourse of man should be dissolvable into “simple notions,” the atoms of thought or language. If the structure of language is made to mirror the taxonomic structure of the world, its “exact discoveries” will “deliver the natures of things.” This ideal of a philosophical language reveals the uneasy and unstable marriage of Cartesian philosophy and Aristotelian taxonomy—a marriage which could not last long.¹⁹

¹⁹ Slaughter, *Universal Languages and Scientific Taxonomy*, 128, convincingly argues

For Ward and Wilkins, the words of a natural language cannot merely reflect or mirror ideas or things, they must define them. Consequently, they argue that Webster's discussion of the Egyptian symbols is not appropriate in the context of a debate about the teaching of grammar, for "*Hieroglyphicks . . . were invented for concealment of things,*" rather than "for *explication* of our minds and notions" (18). In order to understand their criticism of the hieroglyphs, it is not enough to take the assertion that the Egyptian symbols were "invented for *concealment*" as though they merely meant that the hieroglyphs are esoteric figures. They contrast "*concealment*" with "*explication,*" whose opposite in Renaissance and seventeenth-century thought about visual imagery is "implication." That is, the hieroglyphs conceal by implicating or folding up meaning into a concentrated symbolic image that, as Plotinus would say, signifies all at once.²⁰

Ward and Wilkins want to unfold meaning in discourse. In the hieroglyphic tradition, representation is a matter of pure reflection or of implication; in the case of the real characters, it is one of explication or of articulation—that is, what should be mirrored in language are not the things of nature or the symbolic images of Ideas but the taxonomic relations between simple things or ideas. For Webster, the world is written in a script of Neoplatonic ideas which might be appropriately represented by hieroglyphs; for Ward and Wilkins the world has an Aristotelian "grammar" of genera and species, and so too must the language that gives it symbolic form.

However, Ward and Wilkins reject hieroglyphs less absolutely than they seem to and for the same reasons that Bacon gave in his remarks on the sacred symbols. On the one hand, they argue that Webster inappropriately discusses hieroglyphs, which are "dumb signs" without a grammar, with the spoken languages, that do have a grammar. Although both are "conversant . . . with signification," they remain "as absolutely different as the eare is from the ey" (18). Hieroglyphs, being mute symbols, compose a language of "the ey"; the spoken language composes one of "the eare." And yet when they come to their discussion of a philosophical character, it is precisely its aspect as a language that makes visual sense, like the hieroglyphs, that is essential: the characters "will represent *to the very eye* all the elements of their composition, & so deliver *the natures of things* [emphases mine]" (21). To be sure, they would want "to make it [the philosophical character] effable, because it is a dul thing to discourse by pointing & indication" (21), but the invention

that "the distinction between the qualitative and quantitative, between the atomistic and the generic, between the mathematical and the taxonomic was not properly understood by the linguistic successors of Descartes, viz. Ward, Wilkins, and Dalgarno. . . ."

²⁰ On implication and explication, see Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York, 1968), 204 ff, 206-7.

of a phonetic system for the pronunciation of the character is a secondary consideration for seventeenth-century language projectors; the consideration of paramount importance is that the characters make sense to the eye, not to the ear.

Later, in his *Essay toward a Real Character* (1668), Wilkins writes:

But there is reason to doubt whether there be any thing in these [hieroglyphs] worth the enquiry, the discoveries that have been hitherto made out of them being but very few and insignificant. They seem to be but a slight, imperfect invention, sutable to those first and ruder Ages. . . . And it seems to me questionable, whether the Egyptians did not first use their *Hieroglyphicks* . . . for want of *Letters*. [12]

Wilkins is interested in a real character that reflects the taxonomic structure of things. The hieroglyphs do not have the right “grammar” to do this. But Wilkins, closely following Bacon, discounts the hieroglyphs primarily because he discounts the tradition of the ancient wisdom of the Egyptians. He doubts “whether there be any thing in these [hieroglyphs] worth the enquiry.” Egyptian learning has lost its prestige, but the hieroglyphs themselves, as symbols that make visual sense, still retain theirs.

The End of the Hieroglyphic Tradition

In 1668, when John Wilkins finally published his massive *Essay towards a Real Character, and a Philosophical Language* under the auspices of the Royal Society, the theoretical ideas that he and Seth Ward outlined earlier in the *Vindiciae academiarum* find their practical expression. In its attempt to use real characters to classify the logical and generic relations of “all . . . Things and Notions,” Wilkins’s work forms a conceptual encyclopedia of the English language that is no less preposterous in its own way than was Valeriano’s Renaissance attempt to find the symbolic equivalences of all things in his *Hieroglyphica* (1556). In fact I would argue that the encyclopedic aspirations of the *Essay* are a heritage of late-Renaissance culture, and that its most important difference from earlier encyclopedias is that it is structured according to Aristotelian taxonomy rather than Neoplatonic symbolic images.²¹ The *Essay* is a late-Renaissance anatomy, and it is one of the very last of its kind.

Indeed, the intellectual culture that informs its new ideas was considerably shorter lived than was that which produced Valeriano’s ency-

²¹ As Padley notes in *Grammatical Theory*, 262-63: “Even so self-consciously innovative a movement as the campaign for a universal language, with its pre-supposition of a correspondence between the ontological order of nature and the linguistic order—a presupposition already made by Scaliger and resting on medieval doctrine—is at least partly dependent on systems of conceptual classification which repose on the Aristotelian world-view and on Scholastic philosophy.”

clopedia. Already by 1699 the English mathematician Thomas Baker writes in his *Reflections Upon Learning*:

When Bishop Wilkins undertook this design *substance* and *Accidents* were a receiv'd Division and accordingly in ranking Things, and reducing them to Heads . . . he proceeds according to the Order they stand in, of *Substance* and *Accidents*, in the Scale of *Praedicaments*; but were he to begin now, and would suit his Design to the Philosophy in vogue, he must draw a new Scheme. . . .²²

Only some thirty years after the publication of the *Essay* there was already "a new Scheme" that made Wilkins's work seem to belong to a different age. Wilkins's "lines of division" of nature according to "*Substance* and *Accidents*" are the last flower of medieval scholasticism as it was modified by Renaissance culture. And his real characters, however "rich and strange," grow out of the soil of the Renaissance search for a natural language, an ideal that, like the hieroglyphic tradition which gave it intellectual support, was also obsolete by the time that Baker wrote his remarks on Wilkins's *Essay*.

In the years between the publication of the *Essay* and Baker's remarks on it, the work of John Locke and other philosophers and scientists had opened a new chapter in Western thought, one in which there was no place for the ideal of a natural language in any of its Renaissance or seventeenth-century forms. In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) Locke announces:

Words . . . come to be made use of by Men as *the Signs of their Ideas*; not by any natural connexion, that there is between particular articulate Sounds and certain *Ideas*, for then there would be but one Language amongst all Men; but by a voluntary Imposition, whereby such a Word is made arbitrarily the Mark of such an *Idea*. The use then of Words, is to be sensible Marks of *Ideas*; and the *Ideas* they stand for, are their proper and immediate Signification.²³

There is no possibility of "any natural connexion" between words and ideas and consequently no possibility of a natural language as the men of the Renaissance or the earlier seventeenth century would understand the term.

Locke's shift from words and things to words and ideas is evidence that the language problem has moved to new ground.²⁴ It is no longer the order of things that language mirrors but the order of sense perception. The data of sense perception can provide man with reliable information about the world. However, man's ideas are no longer natural signs that

²² Quoted by DeMott, "Science Versus Mnemonics," *Isis*, 48 (1957), 12, n. 25.

²³ *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch, bk. III, ch. ii, sec. 1 (Oxford, 1975), (405).

²⁴ See Cohen, *Sensible Words*, xxiv-xxv, and more generally Cohen's "From the Lexical to the Syntactic," 25-30; also Aarsleff, in "Leibnitz on Locke on Language," *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis, 1982), 61-63.

mirror the natural order, and hence there can be no natural language on the model of the Adamic language, the hieroglyphs, or the real characters.

It may seem that the universal language proposed by Webster and the philosophical language discussed by Ward and Wilkins are both instances of an arbitrary system of signs, a real character, that fits into the Lockean conception of the relation between language and the world, and therefore belong to the new epistemic. But that, I think, is to misread what is happening in England in the seventeenth century. The study of the ideas about language expressed in any given period cannot be separated from that period's conception of man and his world.

The artificial nature of the signs used by seventeenth-century projectors should not mislead us into thinking that they hold a view of language similar to or foreshadowing the one expressed by Locke. Already at the turn of the century Bacon had distinguished between two kinds of "notes of cogitations," those like the hieroglyphs that were *ex congruo* and wherein "the note hath some similitude or congruity with the notion," and those like the Chinese ideograms that were *ad placitum* and had "force only by contract or acceptation." But in relying on artificial signs, Webster or Ward are no more like Locke than is Bacon. The signs that compose the real character are conventional in the Aristotelian sense but are not thereby arbitrary in the Lockean sense.

The surface similarity between the conventionalism of Aristotle and the linguistic arbitrariness of Locke is misleading, for the order of nature that the signs represent is conceived differently. For Aristotle, linguistic signs are the conventional creations of men, but their signifying value is guaranteed by their representing ideas which are the natural signs of things.²⁵ This is how a real character composed of artificial signs could still remain a natural language—its linguistic signs reflect the natural signs of the mind. Webster believes the book of nature is written in characters that are divine Ideas; Ward and Wilkins believe the world is written in a taxonomic "grammar." But in either case the implicit metaphor is that of a language of nature that their discourse would translate. The characters of the universal or the philosophical scripts were meant to reflect a world that is conceived to be structured as a language, whether it be written in a hieroglyphic or a "grammatical" script. In the first instance the linguistic model is more or less Neoplatonic, in the second more or less Neo-Aristotelian. Still, the Aristotelian conception of language is no more like the Lockean than the Lockean is like the Saussurean. While all three of these thinkers insist that the linguistic sign is not

²⁵ Aristotle, *On Interpretation, The Basic Works*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York, 1941), 40: "Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all, as also are those things of which our experiences are the images."

natural, all three hold different conceptions of nature. That is, the context of their arguments are very different. And it is the context that determines meaning because the context determines the use of the concept.

Locke's theory of language, and in particular his doctrine of the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, is inseparable from his views about how man comes to know the world. For Locke the mind is no longer in touch with nature in the same way as it is for the late-Renaissance followers of either Plato or Aristotle. The "veil of ideas" has fallen. Language now has a different role to play in mediating between the world and the mind. With Locke and Newton the world is read differently, either through the data of sense perception or through the language of mathematics.²⁶ Both the psychological and the mathematical approaches provide new models of privileged languages, but they belong to a different intellectual world than that inhabited by natural language, real characters, or hieroglyphs.²⁷

Webster differs from Ward and Wilkins in several important ways, most notably in the former's idea of the "pure language of nature," but the significance of their debate can not be fully understood if it is interpreted merely as the seventeenth-century struggle of traditional historiography between a religious Neoplatonist and two exemplars of the new scientific spirit. What is remarkable is how much both sides hold in common with each other and how little either side has in common with Locke. They agree completely on what is the one essential point of any controversy that is only a family quarrel rather than a dispute between intellectual tendencies that are fundamentally incompatible: they agree on the terms of the debate.

Both sides in the debate are looking for a natural language. This search implies a nonproblematic view of the relation between the order of nature and the human mind—a pre-epistemological view, one might say. Webster is very much a Platonist, while Ward and Webster lean toward Aristotelianism, but the latter are not thereby more scientific in the sense of being more Lockean or Newtonian. Rather, both sides are the heirs of Francis Bacon, which is to say they are examples of late-Renaissance thinkers in much the same way that their contemporary, John Milton, is a late-Renaissance poet. Their differences are enormous—as enormous, one might say, as the differences between Platonic and

²⁶ Sir Thomas Browne's *Garden of Cyrus*, an astonishing attempt to combine the privileged languages of hieroglyphs and mathematics in the geometrical hieroglyphs that make up his quincunxes. See my "Sir Thomas Browne's 'Emphatical decussation, or fundamentall figure': Geometrical Hieroglyphs and *The Garden of Cyrus*," *English Literary Renaissance*, 17 (1987), 85-102.

²⁷ On the history and philosophical implications of the privileged language of Lockean psychology, see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1979), esp. ch. I and V, with a superb treatment of "picture theory" of language, found both in Ward-Webster and in the early Wittgenstein.

Aristotelian thought—but they are not the kind of differences that mark distinct cultural periods. Both sides still share the same vocabulary, and the same could not be said for John Locke.

I am not saying that because Ward and Wilkins have more in common with Webster than they do with Locke that they are thereby backward in their thinking, that they have somehow missed the bus to the future. That would make just as little sense as to say that John Milton was backward as a poet because he did not write like Dryden. But this does suggest that Michel Foucault's assertion in *The Order of Things* that an epistemic rupture separates Renaissance and seventeenth-century discourse needs some rethinking.²⁸ Foucault's model does work well for continental thought, but in England it may be more useful to argue that the change is much more gradual, and that if there is a clear epistemic rupture, it does not arrive until Locke and Newton. As this study has attempted to show, attitudes toward the hieroglyphs, the ideal of natural language, and the real characters are important indicators of this shift.

Notes, Notions, and Things

In England hieroglyphs, universal languages, real characters, philosophical languages, and natural language form a spectrum of related ideas during the late Renaissance and the first three-quarters of the seventeenth century. Not every thinker was equally interested in all of these ideas—the Webster-Ward-Wilkins debate proves this—but within the culture as a whole these languages provided mutual support for one another. When they disappeared from western intellectual culture, they left as a group, and they took with them the picture of the world they served to represent. The project of creating real characters is not a part of the new philosophy of science as defined by Lockean empiricism, though it could and did flourish alongside of it for a short time. Rather, it grew out of the Renaissance tradition of the hieroglyphs and of the ideal of a natural language.

And this tradition can help in understanding the intellectual changes that mark the passage from the Renaissance to the Age of Reason and Neoclassicism. Consider the relation between three terms: language, the mind, and nature; or as the men of the seventeenth century would say, notes, notions, and things. In the Renaissance picture, notes, notions, and things could form a trinity wherein each was of equal value. This is most readily apparent in the way that anyone of the three could easily serve as something more than just a metaphor for the others. Nature, for example, is both an idea in the mind of God and a language, the book of the world. Language itself is a thing of nature, a *res*, as the very

²⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [Translation of *Les mots et les choses*, 1966] (New York, 1970), ch. 2 and 3.

expressions, *natural* language and *real* character indicate. Speculation on the hieroglyphs flourished in this climate, for they composed a *language* that used the *things* of nature to represent *ideas*, thereby uniting notes, notions, and things.

But as equal as these terms might be, one term is more equal than the others, ideas. The *primus inter pares* status of ideas is at least in part the heritage of Plato's decisive contribution to Western culture. Man's capacity for reason is the mark of the divine in him; just as the world and every created thing in it, including man, his mind, and his language, are ideas in the mind of God. Using his reason, man could understand the world and give his understanding expression in language. The ideas in man's mind mediate between language and nature.

The language problem of the early seventeenth century occurred when it was thought that words had slipped out of their rightful place and slipped in between ideas and nature. Rather than reflecting the ideas of the mind, language was distorting those very ideas. This was the language problem that Francis Bacon announced when he described "the *Idols of the Marketplace*": "For men believe that their reason governs words; but it is also true that words react on the understanding; and this it is that has rendered philosophy and the sciences sophistical and inactive." Philosophy and the sciences are sophistical and inactive *because* ideas, the natural products of man's mind, no longer mediate between words and things; ideas are themselves governed by words. Notes had slipped in between notions and things. The regal throne of reason had been usurped by language. For the early seventeenth century this situation was unnatural; it was a problem that needed to be recognized and corrected; it was, in short, the language problem. The natural state of things needed to be restored; a natural language needed to be found. Because they were not tied to spoken tongues, both the hieroglyphs and the real characters were candidates for this natural language, with the choice between them being largely determined by the Neoplatonic or Neo-Aristotelian biases of the projectors.

The men of the later seventeenth century did succeed in ousting words from the central position they had seized but not in order to restore ideas to their former central place. Rather, Locke reformulated the concept of idea and placed nature in the center as the mediator between language and the mind. Ideas were no longer the Neoplatonic forms or Aristotelian universals that balanced words and things; they were the data of sense perception. In this Enlightenment picture ideas could no longer be the master-term of the equation. In fact there could no longer be any pretense at an equation. Instead, a strict hierarchy marks the Enlightenment: nature, then mind, and finally language. Nature was no longer an idea in the mind of God, nor was it a language as in the book of the world. Rather, nature was *that necessary thing*. Ideas thereby became very problematic. The need to explain how Lockean ideas of sensation produced

knowledge of the world resulted in the fashioning of two new intellectual disciplines, psychology and epistemology. As for language, it was relegated to a minor role, and remained a poor cousin until the “linguistic turn” of the twentieth century reshifted the relation between notes, notions, and things once again, and crowned a new king.

Hieroglyphs and the Limits of Language

With this “linguistic turn” the hieroglyphs once more have become objects of philosophical interest. In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Ludwig Wittgenstein writes that “*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*” (#5.6).²⁹ In order to set the limits of language, Wittgenstein turns to the symbolical notation and sigla of Frege’s new concept-script. Wittgenstein’s use of the concept-script and his picture theory of meaning recall, albeit in a distinctively twentieth-century form, some of the underlying assumptions that incited the interest of the men of the seventeenth century in philosophical languages. One obvious difference, and of course there are many, is that Wittgenstein substitutes a grammar of truth functions for the taxonomic grammar of Ward and Wilkins.

He argues that language attaches itself to reality by giving a picture of it. That is, a logical proposition corresponds to reality because the structure of its elements corresponds to the structure of objects in the fact that it represents: “A proposition communicates a situation to us, and so it must be *essentially* [*wesentlich*: the emphasis is the translator’s, though apparently approved by Wittgenstein] connected with the situation. And the connexion is precisely that it is its logical picture” (#4.03). In the concept-script, as in the real character, a language is *essentially* linked to the world, and in just this sense it forms a new version of a natural language. And once again, this essential link is not that of a substantive equality of word and thing as in the Adamic language; rather, it is an equality of structure, of form. Wittgenstein writes that “the sign, of course, is arbitrary” (#3.322). “Artificial” would be more exact, I think. In any case, the “arbitrariness” of logical sigla in no way interrupts the essential nature of Wittgenstein’s concept-script any more than the artificial signs of the seventeenth-century projectors interrupted the essential nature of the real character.

Propositions correspond to reality because their logical form pictures thought, which is in turn a picture of the structure of objects in the world. As for the men of the seventeenth century, the principle of iso-

²⁹ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (London, 1961); on Wittgenstein’s own examples of hieroglyphic drawings, see *Notebooks, 1914-1916*, ed. and tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1961), entry for 29.9.14, 7.

morphism is grounded by the metaphor of “the great mirror”: “How can logic—all-embracing logic, which mirrors the world—use such peculiar crotchets and contrivances [its signs and sigla]? Only because they are all connected with one another in an infinitely fine network, the great mirror” (#5.511). The metaphor of the great mirror calls forth another metaphor that was very much on the minds of the men of the seventeenth century, the hieroglyphs: “In order to understand the essential nature of a proposition, we should consider hieroglyphic script, which depicts the facts that it describes” (#4.016). The “essential nature of a proposition” is that it is “*essentially*” connected with the world because it is a logical picture of a fact. Like the hieroglyphs, a logical proposition “depicts the facts that it describes.” This is because “What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said” (#4.1212).

In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein came to reject the *Tractatus* relation between words and worlds, though he continued to insist that the *Tractatus* picture was the only alternative to his later philosophy. Commenting upon the presuppositions of the *Tractatus* he writes: “A *picture* held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably” (#115).³⁰

More recently, Jacques Derrida has argued that the hieroglyphs form part of a metaphysical picture that has held Western thought captive since Plato. He presents a critique of the “*hieroglyphist prejudice*” in his most influential book, *Of Grammatology*. There, he argues “the myth of a primitive and natural writing . . . constituted the major obstacle to all grammatology”—indeed, “[n]o history of writing could come to terms with it.”³¹

Derrida’s critique of the hieroglyphic tradition is far too large a subject to discuss in this paper. In conclusion, it is enough to note that Wittgenstein and Derrida show that the debate about the hieroglyphs is not yet over. Indeed, I believe that the seventeenth-century discussion of the hieroglyphs ought to suggest just how inadequate is the postmodern metaphor of the Text. Post-structuralists insist that the Text is only that—a metaphor. But metaphor always has and always will tend to take on a life of its own and ask to be understood literally. Much of the power of poetic imagery stems from this very displacement. Textualists can expect no special dispensation that will exempt their metaphor from this process.

The postmodern metaphor of the Text is a more misleading metaphor than the medieval, Renaissance, and seventeenth-century Book of the World ever was. As Richard Rorty puts it, textualism has produced “a

³⁰ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, 3rd ed., tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1958), 48.

³¹ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 75-76 and 80.

new misleading image—the image of the world as consisting of everything written in all the vocabularies used so far.”³² But we simply do not need a new image of the world that gives an overwhelmingly privileged status to either things, or ideas, or language. Of course, any literary theory or philosophy is going to give a greater emphasis to one or another simply because it must have a point of view and a place from which it gets started. It is a question of degree of emphasis, but the amount of emphasis is crucial.

The hieroglyphic tradition was nurtured during an age in which there was an equivalence, more or less, between language, ideas, and nature. The hieroglyphs themselves served as a metaphor linking notes, notions, and things. Being a kind of writing, the hieroglyphs necessarily emphasized language over ideas and things. But being a silent script that used things to represent ideas, they maintained a remarkable balance between the elements that constitute human experience. Herein, I believe, lies their historical appeal both to poets and philosophers. And this balance remains, I think, very appealing. Language has its limits. It cannot bear the weight that it has had to carry since the linguistic turn in philosophy and in literary theory. The limits of language should not be the limits of our world; it should not be the space to which we refer and in which we order all thoughts and all things. That only objectifies language and drives the life out of it. Thereby, both our language and our world are diminished.

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³² Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” *The Consequence of Pragmatism (Essays: 1972-1980)* (Minneapolis, 1982), 154.