On the Story Told from the Tower

A Meditation on Myth, History, and the Habits of Power

I have sometimes wondered whether the greater part of what we call political wisdom consists of stories whose conclusions we have inherited without examining their beginnings.

I do not mean that these stories are necessarily false. Quite the contrary. Some have preserved observations of human conduct that might otherwise have been lost. A fable may contain a truth that an entire library of administrative records has failed to perceive.

But a story is a peculiar vessel for knowledge.

It preserves what its teller considers worth remembering, and in doing so may leave behind precisely what another person would have wished to know.

We inherit the warning, but not always the circumstances that made the warning necessary.

We inherit the hero, but seldom the accounts of those who found him otherwise.

We inherit the institution, and with it an explanation of why the institution must continue.

And because we have heard the explanation since childhood, we may mistake our familiarity with it for evidence of its truth.

I am not certain that this is a failing peculiar to governments. I suspect it is a failing of the human mind, which prefers an intelligible account of the world to the labor of examining every condition upon which that account depends.

I recognize the tendency in myself.

I have often believed a thing because it seemed reasonable, only to discover that what I had taken for reason was merely the pleasure of recognizing an arrangement I already understood.

Perhaps this is why the old stories deserve to be read again.

Not because their authors failed us, but because we may have become too accustomed to hearing only one of the questions they contain.

Consider the Tower of Babel.

The people spoke one language. They settled upon a plain. They discovered that clay could be made into brick, and resolved to construct a city and a tower whose summit would reach the heavens.

They wished to make a name for themselves.

They feared being scattered.

And so they built.

We commonly remember what followed: the confusion of their language, the interruption of their undertaking, and their dispersal across the earth.

Yet I find myself detained by something earlier.

Who determined that the tower was necessary?

The text does not tell us that a king commanded its construction. It does not describe unwilling laborers, nor does it record an argument among the builders. To supply these things would be to impose upon the narrative a history that it does not contain.

Nevertheless, it is curious that the people appear to us almost entirely as a single will.

They speak together.

They intend together.

They suffer the consequence together.

Whether every individual shared the ambition is a question the narrative neither raises nor resolves.

And I wonder whether we have not become accustomed to accepting such collective declarations in our own histories.

The nation desired.

The people demanded.

The republic resolved.

The empire believed.

These are convenient expressions, and perhaps unavoidable ones. No historian could reasonably recount the thoughts of every person who ever inhabited a country.

But convenience is not innocence.

When we say that a people wished for something, we ought occasionally to inquire which people had the opportunity to say so.

I. Of the Stories by Which We Govern Ourselves

I have no quarrel with the human tendency to teach through stories.

Indeed, I suspect we could scarcely live together without it.

A child cannot be expected to examine the whole history of law before understanding that another person's property ought not be taken without permission.

Nor can every generation independently discover all the dangers encountered by those who preceded it.

We inherit cautions.

We preserve examples.

We make of experience something portable.

The fable teaches generosity through the conduct of animals. The myth considers ambition through the misfortunes of heroes. The religious narrative gives moral consequence a form that may be remembered long after an abstract commandment has been forgotten.

In these ways, storytelling becomes a kind of social memory.

But memory is not the same as judgment.

I think of Icarus, whose flight has so often been employed to instruct the young against excessive ambition.

We are told that he flew too high, that the heat of the sun weakened his wings, and that he fell.

From this, we have learned to distrust the person who disregards a warning.

Yet the story also contains a father who fashioned wings for his son and entrusted him with an extraordinary freedom.

Was the failure entirely one of obedience?

Or might we ask whether Icarus understood how to recognize the height at which flight became dangerous?

There is a difference between being told where a boundary lies and being taught how to perceive it.

I do not suggest that Daedalus was wrong to warn his son. Nor do I suppose that every caution requires an elaborate education in the principles from which it arose.

But I wonder what happens when a specific warning becomes a universal rule.

An instruction devised for wings of wax may not govern every manner of flight.

And a political arrangement established to answer one danger may not remain the wisest arrangement after that danger has passed.

Nevertheless, institutions often possess a remarkable talent for preserving their original explanations.

A rule is established because a particular consequence is feared.

The rule survives.

Its circumstances are forgotten.

And eventually the continued existence of the rule is presented as evidence that the rule must have been necessary.

Thus a community may come to inherit not only the wisdom of its ancestors, but their unexamined assumptions.

I would not willingly discard either without inspection.

For it is possible to be foolish in one's rebellion against tradition, just as it is possible to be foolish in one's obedience to it.

The difficulty is discovering which is which.

II. Of the King Who Spoke Three Languages

In the mountains of western Iran, Darius I caused an account of his ascent to power to be carved upon the rock at Bisotun.

The monument describes his victories over rivals and presents his restoration of imperial authority.

Its inscriptions appear in three languages: Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian.

I find this monument remarkable for many reasons, not least because its eventual decipherment helped recover knowledge that had remained inaccessible to later generations.

There is something deeply moving about writing that survives its author by thousands of years and comes at last to be understood by strangers.

Yet I am struck by another consideration.

Three languages were employed to preserve the account of one sovereign.

The languages differed.

The authority behind the account did not.

I do not mean that the inscription is therefore without historical value. Its importance is beyond question. Nor should we suppose that an ancient monument was intended to satisfy the expectations of a modern historical inquiry.

But the distinction remains useful.

A history may be written in many languages and still be told from one side.

The king's victory becomes the restoration of order.

His opponents become rebels.

His legitimacy is established within the account that he has commissioned.

Those who opposed him may have possessed explanations of their own, but their explanations do not occupy an equivalent position upon the monument.

I wonder how often posterity has mistaken the endurance of a record for the completeness of an event.

Stone survives.

So do archives, official correspondence, decrees, and carefully maintained genealogies.

But the survival of evidence is not an equal privilege.

Those who govern may possess the resources to preserve their accounts, while those who are governed leave behind fragmentary traces of their lives.

This does not mean that the preserved account should be rejected.

It means that the historian must remember what the record is capable of establishing, and what may remain beyond its reach.

I have sometimes thought that our greatest error in reading history is not that we believe everything we find, but that we forget to consider what we have not found.

A monument can tell us what its commissioners wished to declare.

It may tell us much about what actually occurred.

But it cannot, merely by surviving, establish that no other account was possible.

The dead cannot all come forward to correct us.

And we ought to exercise some humility in speaking on their behalf.

III. Of a Republic That Remembered Babel

On 4 June 1794, Henri Grégoire addressed the French National Convention concerning the languages spoken within the republic.

France possessed a considerable diversity of regional languages and forms of speech.

To Grégoire, this diversity presented an obstacle to the political and educational ambitions of the Revolution.

A citizen unable to understand the language in which laws were communicated might find himself excluded from the very liberty those laws purported to establish.

This concern was not unreasonable.

Indeed, I should hesitate to criticize it without first acknowledging its force.

Political rights cannot be meaningfully exercised by people who are unable to understand the obligations, procedures, and protections through which those rights operate.

Communication is not a luxury of republican government.

It is among its necessities.

But Grégoire proceeded from the desirability of communication toward the uniformity of language.

He invoked the Tower of Babel to describe the linguistic condition of France.

And here I find myself returned to the old story by a most unexpected road.

In Genesis, the builders begin with one language. Their common speech permits their common undertaking. The loss of mutual understanding interrupts the work.

In revolutionary France, the diversity of languages became a difficulty to be overcome in the service of a common political project.

Grégoire did not propose that the entire world could be returned to one language. He expressly regarded that ambition as impracticable.

He believed, however, that a great nation might be made linguistically uniform, and that such uniformity would advance the work of the republic.

The distinction is important.

Yet so is the question that follows.

When does the desire to make oneself understood become the demand that others speak as oneself?

I confess that I understand the attraction of a common language.

It permits strangers to cooperate.

It enables laws to be communicated.

It allows knowledge to travel beyond the communities in which it originated.

But I cannot persuade myself that the usefulness of a common language establishes the necessity of extinguishing the others.

A person may learn to speak French without ceasing to speak Breton.

A government may translate its laws without requiring its citizens to abandon the languages in which they learned to love, mourn, pray, and remember.

These alternatives involve difficulties, certainly.

But political difficulty is not, by itself, evidence of impossibility.

And administrative simplicity is not a complete measure of human good.

What interests me most is the ease with which the same ancient narrative may be made to serve different conclusions.

One reader sees in Babel a warning against excessive ambition.

Another sees the disorder of linguistic division.

Another may discover a question about the dangers of concentrated purpose.

The text remains.

The purposes brought to it change.

And when those purposes acquire political authority, interpretation ceases to be merely a literary matter.

It becomes capable of governing lives.

IV. Of the Difference Between Teaching and Erasure

There are circumstances in which the consequences of this distinction become grave.

In the United States, federal Indian boarding school policies were employed to assimilate Indigenous children into the dominant society.

Children were separated from families and communities. Indigenous languages and cultural practices were suppressed. The institutions inflicted injuries whose consequences extended far beyond the years of an individual child's confinement.

The United States Department of the Interior documented this history in investigations published in 2022 and 2024.

I hesitate to place such suffering too neatly within a philosophical comparison.

There is a danger in making the injuries of others serve merely as illustrations for one's argument.

These were not hypothetical children, and their languages were not abstractions.

Their experiences require attention in their own right.

Nevertheless, the history reveals something essential about the relationship between political purpose and moral judgment.

An institution may describe its activity as education.

It may believe itself engaged in improvement.

It may present the alteration of a child's language, customs, and loyalties as preparation for a better life.

Yet the institution's description of its own purpose cannot determine the moral character of its conduct.

Nor does the claimed benefit erase the injury.

A child is not simply an unfinished citizen awaiting correction.

A language is not simply an obstacle to administrative convenience.

And the continuity of a people cannot be measured solely by the degree to which its members resemble those exercising authority over them.

I do not believe that every effort to establish common civic practices is an act of domination.

To claim so would be to replace one simplification with another.

But the distinction between teaching and erasure must be preserved.

One enlarges the possibilities available to a person.

The other seeks to determine which possibilities that person shall be permitted to retain.

A common language may be offered as a bridge. It becomes something else when crossing it requires the destruction of the shore from which one came.

V. Of What We Call Success

I return now to a question that seems to trouble much of our political reasoning.

What do we mean when we say that an arrangement works?

A monarchy may endure for centuries.

An empire may extend its authority across vast territories.

A bureaucracy may administer millions of lives with remarkable consistency.

A republic may preserve its institutions through repeated crises.

Each may be called successful.

But successful at what?

I do not ask the question merely to be troublesome.

It seems to me that no judgment of success is complete without an account of the object toward which success was directed.

A prison may be successful at preventing escape without being humane.

An empire may be successful at collecting tribute without being just.

A government may be successful at preserving public order without securing the meaningful consent of those who live beneath it.

And a political institution may be admirably efficient at accomplishing purposes that ought never to have been adopted.

Yet we are often inclined to regard endurance as evidence of wisdom.

What has survived must have worked.

What worked must have been necessary.

What was necessary must have been reasonable.

And what was reasonable must be preserved.

There is a pleasing order to this progression.

Unfortunately, the conclusion is not established by the premises.

A thing may survive because it is useful.

It may also survive because it is difficult to change.

It may endure through affection, habit, coercion, fear, or the absence of an available alternative.

These causes may coexist within a single institution.

To distinguish among them requires more than an examination of how long the institution has stood.

It requires an inquiry into the lives lived under its authority.

I suspect that many political errors begin with our failure to distinguish between an arrangement that serves a community and an arrangement that has successfully persuaded the community of its necessity.

This is not to deny the value of political science.

On the contrary, systematic inquiry offers means of testing claims that tradition may have placed beyond examination.

We may compare institutions, study their consequences, and investigate the conditions under which they produce particular results.

But even the most careful account of a political mechanism cannot independently establish the moral worth of its operation.

We can discover how a system preserves power without discovering that the power deserves preservation.

We can measure compliance without establishing consent.

We can describe stability without proving justice.

These distinctions are not criticisms of scientific inquiry. They are reminders that a method ought not be asked to answer questions for which it was never designed.

The physician may explain how a body survives.

That explanation alone does not tell us what constitutes a life well lived.

So, too, the political scientist may explain how an institution endures.

But the question of whether it ought to endure remains open to further judgment.

I wonder whether our desire for certainty sometimes leads us to mistake the ability to explain a thing for the authority to justify it.

The distinction seems small until one considers how much power may be exercised in its absence.

VI. Of the Stories That Become Laws

It would be easy to conclude from these examples that political narratives are instruments by which the powerful deceive the weak.

But I distrust the ease of that conclusion.

It makes the powerful too cunning, the governed too innocent, and human history much simpler than I have ever found it to be.

People do not believe stories solely because they are commanded to believe them.

They believe because the stories offer explanations.

Because they contain recognizable experience.

Because they provide continuity between generations.

Because they make suffering intelligible, cooperation possible, or uncertainty bearable.

Sometimes people preserve an institution not because they have been deceived, but because they have good reason to fear what might replace it.

Sometimes they defend arrangements from which they benefit.

Sometimes they defend arrangements that injure them.

And sometimes the same person does all three.

I include myself among those who are susceptible to comforting explanations.

There are stories about liberty, justice, and the progress of civilization that I would very much like to believe.

I find them beautiful.

I find them necessary to certain hopes I am unwilling to abandon.

But my affection for them cannot establish their accuracy.

Indeed, the greater my affection, the more carefully I ought to examine what I have permitted myself to overlook.

For a political story becomes dangerous not merely when it is false.

It may become dangerous when it is treated as complete.

A founding declaration may express a genuine principle of equality while the institutions established beneath it fail to recognize whole classes of persons.

A constitution may articulate restraints upon power while those entrusted with enforcing its provisions fail to observe them.

A republic may celebrate the sovereignty of the people while preserving arrangements through which some people possess far greater influence than others.

Such contradictions do not necessarily render the founding principles worthless.

Sometimes they reveal the unfinished obligations those principles impose.

And this is perhaps the most hopeful possibility contained within political narrative.

A story used to justify power may also furnish the language by which power is called to account.

The governed may take the words of their governors seriously.

They may ask that proclaimed principles be made operative.

They may insist that a promise be understood to include those whom its original authors neglected.

The story survives, but its meaning is enlarged.

What was once employed to preserve an arrangement becomes a means of examining it.

And what seemed settled becomes again a question.

VII. Of the Tower We Continue to Build

I return to Babel with less certainty than I possessed when I began.

This is not altogether displeasing.

I have never understood why the examination of an idea should be considered unsuccessful merely because it leaves us with better questions than those with which we arrived.

Perhaps the tower was an expression of human arrogance.

Perhaps it was an attempt to preserve unity against the fear of dispersal.

Perhaps the narrative considers the limits of collective ambition.

Perhaps it contains several lessons whose relationship remains difficult to resolve.

I do not know that any one interpretation exhausts it.

But I find myself thinking of the builders.

They had learned to make bricks.

This was no small accomplishment.

They possessed the knowledge to transform the materials of the earth into something capable of supporting a common work.

They could communicate.

They could cooperate.

They could imagine a structure that no individual among them could have raised alone.

There is something admirable in this.

The capacity to act together is among the great achievements of human beings.

Without it, there would be no cities, no libraries, no hospitals, no gardens cultivated for those who have not yet been born.

The tragedy, if there is one, cannot consist simply in the fact that people learned to build.

I wonder instead about the purpose to which that capacity was directed.

They wished to make a name for themselves.

They feared being scattered.

Perhaps their undertaking was not only an expression of ambition, but also an answer to fear.

And fear is a powerful architect.

It persuades communities to accept arrangements they might otherwise question.

It makes uniformity appear safer than difference.

It teaches people to regard disagreement as a threat to the structure upon which they depend.

Yet a community that cannot endure disagreement possesses a precarious kind of unity.

Its peace depends upon the continued suppression of questions.

Its stability depends upon the absence of alternatives.

Its common language may conceal the fact that its members have ceased to understand one another.

I do not propose that a society can exist without shared understandings.

Some measure of common purpose is necessary if people are to undertake responsibilities together.

But I wonder whether we have too often confused common purpose with common submission.

A people may agree to preserve a law while disagreeing about its wisdom.

They may share a country without sharing every account of its history.

They may accept obligations to one another without believing that those obligations require the abandonment of their differences.

And they may revise their institutions without repudiating everything that their predecessors attempted to accomplish.

Perhaps political maturity lies partly in this ability.

Not merely to preserve what has been built, nor merely to dismantle what has become objectionable, but to examine the structure with sufficient honesty to distinguish its foundations from its unnecessary burdens.

To discover which walls shelter.

Which walls imprison.

Which repairs are possible.

And which stones ought never to have been placed upon another person's shoulders.

VIII. Of Those Who Remain Below

I find that I have spent much of this inquiry looking upward.

Toward the tower.

Toward the king's inscription.

Toward the republic and its ambitions.

Toward the institutions through which communities attempt to give permanence to their purposes.

This, too, is a habit worth examining.

Power draws the eye.

We study its structures, its declarations, its conflicts, and its achievements.

We name the rulers.

We preserve the dates.

We recount the great decisions.

But the lives most extensively governed by those decisions do not always receive a proportionate place in the record.

The person who made the brick may have known something about the tower that its architect did not.

The child forbidden to speak an inherited language may have understood something about the purposes of education that the institution's administrators failed to consider.

The citizen unable to read the law may have possessed a clearer understanding of political exclusion than the official who praised the law's universality.

These possibilities do not mean that every experience is an equally reliable account of every event.

But they remind us that no single position grants complete knowledge of a society.

The view from above is not the whole of the world.

Nor is the view from below.

I suspect that wisdom requires us to acknowledge the limits of both.

If political science is to investigate the arrangements through which human beings collect and exercise power, it must remain attentive to the stories by which those arrangements are explained.

If political philosophy is to examine their legitimacy, it must be willing to hear from those whose lives disclose the distance between a principle and its practice.

And if history is to preserve what may be known of the past, it must resist the temptation to mistake the surviving account for the totality of human experience.

We cannot recover every lost voice.

We cannot reconstruct every motive.

We cannot know with certainty all that might have happened had a different decision been made.

But we can refuse to convert these limitations into permission for indifference.

We can distinguish what the record establishes from what we merely suppose.

We can acknowledge when an institution has preserved its own explanation more faithfully than the experiences of those subject to it.

And we can leave room in our understanding for the possibility that another account might alter our judgment.

I think this a modest ambition.

Perhaps it is too modest for those who wish to build towers.

But I have come to distrust political ambitions that regard modesty as an obstacle.

For there is no necessary shame in discovering that one's understanding is incomplete.

The shame, if any, lies in refusing to examine it once the incompleteness has become visible.

I began by wondering whether political wisdom might consist partly of inherited stories about what works.

I remain inclined to think so.

But I would now add that the worth of those stories depends not only upon what they preserve, but upon what they permit us to question.

A tradition that cannot be examined is no longer merely an inheritance.

It has become an authority over the living.

And an institution that cannot explain why its purposes remain worth pursuing has begun to confuse its continued existence with its justification.

Perhaps, then, the question left to us by Babel is not how humanity might recover a single language.

Perhaps it is whether we can learn to understand one another without requiring everyone to speak with a single voice.

I cannot say that we have yet accomplished this.

But neither am I persuaded that the undertaking is impossible.

After all, the builders of Babel knew how to make bricks.

They knew how to work together.

They knew how to imagine something greater than themselves.

What they did not leave us was an account of how they might have chosen another purpose.

And perhaps that is the part of the story we are still responsible for writing.

Not the account of a people who finally completed the tower.

Nor the account of a people who abandoned all hope of building together.

But the account of a people who learned to ask what they were building, why they were building it, and whether those who would live beneath its shadow had been given a meaningful part in the decision.

For the height of a tower tells us very little about the wisdom of its builders.

And the endurance of an institution tells us very little about the lives it has made possible.

I should like to know more about those lives.

I should like to hear the stories that were not carved into the monument.

And before we lay another brick, I should like to know whether we have mistaken the preservation of the tower for the preservation of the people.

Sources and Historical Notes

1. The Tower of Babel — Genesis 11:1–9.
The narrative describes the people settling in Shinar, making fired bricks, undertaking the construction of a city and tower, and experiencing the confusion of their language and subsequent dispersal. The questions about individual consent and unrecorded disagreement are interpretive inquiries, not claims about events described in the biblical text.

2. The Bisotun Inscription — UNESCO World Heritage Centre, *Bisotun*.
The inscription was commissioned by Darius I in 521 BCE and presents his account of the establishment of his authority. It contains texts in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian. The monument was important to the nineteenth-century decipherment of cuneiform writing.

3. Henri Grégoire — *Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser l'usage de la langue française* (1794).
Presented to the French National Convention on 4 June 1794. The report explicitly invokes the Tower of Babel in discussing the regional languages of France and advocates linguistic uniformity as a means of advancing republican unity. Reproduced in *Archives parlementaires de la Révolution française*, vol. 91, pp. 318–326. The French National Assembly also preserves the speech in its collection of major parliamentary addresses.

4. United States Department of the Interior — Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Reports, Volumes I and II (2022, 2024).
These federal investigations document the history, institutions, policies, and consequences of the federal Indian boarding school system, including the suppression of Indigenous languages and cultural practices.

5. Michel de Montaigne — *Essais*, particularly Book I, Chapter 23, "Of Custom, and That We Should Not Easily Change a Law Received"; Book I, Chapter 31, "Of Cannibals"; and Book III, Chapter 13, "Of Experience."
These essays provide philosophical context for the relationship between custom, inherited judgment, cultural perspective, and the limits of knowledge. The present meditation draws on Montaigne's method of inquiry rather than presenting his arguments as direct historical evidence for its claims.