

The Tower of Babel

*nil mortalibus ardui est;
Caelum ipsum petimus stultitia.*

Horace

I

A proper story is like a river; sometimes it may be traced back to a source in the hills, but what it becomes reflects the scenery through which it flows. It has a history, and its history is marked by the appearance of new incidents or new characters; its colours change; it is told in fresh idioms; it may be concentrated into a ballad or a song only to be dispersed again in more prosaic tellings.

And a proper story has another quality besides this capacity to mirror the changes of human circumstances. It is the expression of some unchanging human predicament; as a Highland lament, composed to reconcile a passionate people to a contingent misfortune, expresses all the sorrows suffered by mankind since the beginning of time.

Mine is a proper story. Its source is in the mist-hung mountains of time past; and there is nowhere in the world where some version of it has not been told. It is to be found among the stories of the Chinese, the Caldeans and the ancient Hebrews, and among the Arab and Slav peoples, and the Aztecs of Peru. It has been told in the Greek, the Latin, the Celtic, and the Teutonic languages and in the

tongues of those who for millennia have moved about the islands of the Pacific ocean. It is concerned with earth and heaven; with men and Gods and how they stand to one another. It is concerned with the conduct and the relations of human beings; and with perfection and imperfection.

The fortunes of Faust and the adventures of Don Juan are somewhat banal versions of it in which gold and girls are the centre of attention. And it is embedded in the tragic drama we know as the Arthurian legend. There (if you remember), what destroyed his Fellowship of the Knights was nothing so contingent as the infidelities of Lancelot and Guenevere. Arthur brushed these off, as did Charlemagne in a similar situation, which, appropriately enough, concerned the antics of an ancestor of Metternich. No; it was the quest of Sangrael itself, a prize that was not only a holy relic but (alas) also a vulgar cornucopia, that was their undoing. But the story is most familiar to us in the version first heard by the ancient Hebrew people, elaborated by Josephus and by the learned authors of the Talmud, and exciting the imagination of some of the early Christian Fathers. There it is the story of the Tower of Babel, and it runs after this fashion.

2

The lapsed human race released on earth was soon in trouble. Instead of enjoying one another (like poetic children) in a life of perpetual wonder at the marvels of the world, sustained by berries, or exerting themselves joyfully to discover and to cultivate the riches of the earth, grateful for what they could win from it, mankind was filled with limitless wants and with a savage urge to satisfy them. Careless of its beauty, contemptuous of its gifts and persuaded of its hostility, they laid waste the world, seeking only to gratify their perverse and insatiable desires. And their relations with their fellows followed the same

pattern: they were animated by greed, envy, fear and violence.

In response to this situation, Zeus had commissioned Hermes to teach mankind how to manage the condition of mortality with understanding: the cunning of Prometheus had already enabled them to exploit the resources of the earth, but they had yet to learn how to accept *rerum mortalia* with grace. But the God of Israel, a somewhat different character, was so appalled by their depravity that he even repented of ever having 'made man upon earth' and was determined to start afresh. His design was 'to bring a flood of waters upon the earth', to destroy all living things save exemplary representatives of his creation, and to regenerate the human race from the one family which, on account of its virtue, should be rescued from the deluge: namely, that of the widower Noah, his three sons Shem, Ham and Japhet and their wives.

Noah and his family, by the grace of God, survived the flood that inundated the earth. 'The windows of heaven were stopped, the rain from heaven was restrained', the earth became dry land once more, and God set a rainbow in the sky as a sign that he would never again deal so drastically with human depravity; and, indeed, would in future protect mankind from the worst natural calamities: a sign that was later to be confirmed in a covenant with Abraham. Thus God, Nature and Man were reconciled each to each in a promise, not of love, but of decency and forbearance. Noah lived 350 years after the flood, quietly cultivating his vineyard and enjoying the restoration of changefulness to the world – of seedtime and harvest, of summer and winter, day and night, sunshine and rain.

On his death, Shem became the head of the family. He was a simple man, and became for later generations the emblem of a human race at truce with the forces of Nature and anxious to obey the commands of God – a rather dull race genuinely grateful for being alive, but without either nostalgia for the lost Garden of Eden or paradisaical expecta-

tions; a race which, if it kept to its pious resolve to observe its side of the covenant, would give God no trouble, but (as St Augustine later conjectured) might very well cause him to yawn with boredom.

Japhet's fortunes are no part of this story; and this is perhaps not insignificant. For the land of Japhet is Europe whose inhabitants, although they are not at all immune to relapse into antedeluvian depravity, have reconciled themselves to their expulsion from the Garden and have come to regard their eternal salvation as God's business, not theirs: the inventors of civil intercourse, a somewhat precarious peace among themselves which, so far from 'passing all understanding', was very well understood by both Hobbes and Hegel, though not easy to sustain.

But Ham, unlike his brothers, was an *esprit fort*. In earlier days he had earned his father's displeasure on account of several disreputable escapades. He had married young, and was reputed to have made love with his wife while on board the Ark, which, in the circumstances, Noah considered to be irresponsible conduct. Further, during the voyage (if it may be called that), when things were naturally somewhat disordered, he had stolen a family heirloom, namely, the garment which God had given to Adam on his expulsion from Eden, and with which our common ancestor replaced his first extemporized covering. And later, by chance rather than design, Ham had been amused to see the nakedness of his father when Noah lay drunk and uncovered in his tent. The other two sons had the decency to avert their eyes on that occasion. In short, Ham was the black sheep of the family in, as it happens, more than one sense of the expression. These, no doubt, were merely personal delinquencies, revealing only a mildly impious, or even just an adventurous, disposition. But Ham became a man of masterful ambition and energy, up and doing while Shem was on his knees; and he displaced his elder brother as manager of the family fortunes.

Ham begat Cush, and Cush begat Nimrod who is the

central character in the story. Nimrod was the spoilt child of his father's old age. He grew up something of a delinquent. He played truant from school, he became a gang leader at an early age, he was always larking around with the girls, he paid little attention to his prayers and was openly disrespectful to Abraham (the son of Shem) who by then was the titular head of the family. Perhaps Nimrod as a teenager may be discerned as the first of the Hell's Angels – noisy and disruptive.

When Nimrod came of age his father gave him the garment which his disreputable grandfather Ham had stolen from Noah's baggage in the Ark. This was, perhaps, the height of paternal folly. The story is silent about the shape and colour of this garment, but it was generally believed to have magic qualities. According to legend it had been made to God's order by Enoch, the first tailor in the history of the world. On Adam's death it had been returned to Enoch who then gave it to Methuselah; Methuselah bequeathed it to Noah who took it with him into the Ark. Vested in this garment, Nimrod not only felt himself to be a fine fellow, but believed himself to be invincible. Thus Nimrod, the inheritor of the *libertin* disposition of his grandfather Ham, the spoilt son of his doting father Cush, became recognized as a notable adventurer; without deference to his elders, a law unto himself and well endowed with the charisma of impiety. He was admired for his audacity and he acquired a considerable following of flatterers and hangers-on who, dazzled by his blasphemies, surrendered to his leadership.

But he was uneasy. In spite of feeling himself to be invincible he feared that another, mightier than he, would appear and destroy him. Moreover, although he was apt to dismiss the legends of his people as old wives' tales invented to frighten children, he was aware that there was believed to be a God in heaven who might cause his downfall. Indeed, he knew at least by hearsay that years ago this God had not hesitated to inundate the earth on

account of the depravity of its inhabitants, and he was disposed to disbelieve the story that this would never happen again.

Nimrod was nervous beneath his bravado. His was the classic predicament of the *libertin*, so brilliantly imagined (indeed experienced) by Pascal. He could not quite bring himself to announce that 'God is dead', or even that God was discredited and now out of harm's way, hiding in Peru. But being a man of energy he was determined to deal radically with an insecurity that had become an obsession. It was no good trying to outwit or to intimidate God, or to rely upon the possibility of his demise: he must be destroyed.

To this end Nimrod called together his followers who by this time were considerable in numbers but not in intelligence. He addressed them as follows.

We are surrounded by enemies and the most threatening of these is this God with whom Abraham is in league. Come; let us go out into the countryside and build a city where we may do as we please with impunity. And let us call this city the city of Babel: the city of Freedom. And so that we may never again be destroyed by a deluge from heaven, let us build a tower so lofty that it will out-top any flood, so strong it will resist any earthquake, so incombustible that lightning cannot destroy it. Let us, from the top of this Tower, build out great arms which shall prop up the heavens so that they may never fall upon us again – for, as we know, the sky is a great sheet of canvas spread out by God to keep back the waters which would otherwise inundate the earth. Indeed, when we have built this Tower, let us climb up into heaven, break it up with axes and drain away its water where it can do us no injury. Thus shall we avenge the death of our ancestors and make ourselves for ever secure from the hostility of both God and Nature.

To some of his followers the presumption of Nimrod's

proposal was somewhat alarming. But after some hesitation and looking round, they applauded it. Indeed, they had already gone so far with him that they were hardly in a position to turn back from anything he suggested.

The adventure was set on foot next day. A site for the city was seized from some neighbouring shepherds, a rough wall was thrown round it, some shacks were run up, and without delay Nimrod and his followers set about the task of building the Tower. It was not long before the enterprise absorbed the whole of their attention. In the undertaking to subjugate God and Nature to human ambitions they had stumbled upon a life-work and had become the slaves of an ideal.

They built with passion and with energy, careless of everything but the achievement of what they had undertaken. If, in the course of the work, a man fell and was killed, they took no notice. But if the bricks gave way or if some hitch occurred, there was an outcry. Delays provoked protests, malingerers were prodded, holidays forbidden. None was exempt, or wished to be exempt, from this greatest of all adventures in impiety whose architect was Nimrod himself. All gave themselves to the task, the younger dreaming of the security that would follow from its accomplishment, the not-so-young half-regretful of their destiny to spend themselves in the purchase of what they might not live to enjoy.

Meanwhile great-uncle Abraham had observed what was afoot in Babel and was appropriately horrified at its impiety. He prayed to God (who, until then, had hardly noticed what was afoot) to frustrate the builders of the Tower. Indeed, he suggested that this could be most conveniently achieved, not by a second deluge which would engulf all mankind, but in a more economical manner by 'confounding the tongues' of Nimrod and his fellows so that no man among them could understand what any other said when he spoke. Accordingly God commanded the seventy angels who surround his throne to descend upon Babel and to bring this disaster upon its

inhabitants. This they did, leaving behind them a people unable to pursue any co-operative enterprise. Orders were given which were not obeyed because they were not understood; tempers became frayed; exasperation spread; and frustration reached such dimensions that the people of Babel were no longer able even to tolerate the presence of one another. Thus, not by a deluge, but in a flood of meaningless words, was the empire of Nimrod destroyed. Its gibbering people separated and spread themselves over the face of the earth. Its Tower became a crumbling memorial to an impious adventure, and the name of Babel, which had originally meant the City of Freedom, acquired its historic meaning: the City of Confusion.

There are, of course, other versions of this story. According to Muslim tellers it begins with Nimrod and his libertine fellows so exasperated with the pious preaching of Abraham that they threw him into a furnace. But when he came out unharmed they were dismayed and took it for a sign that the God of Abraham was both hostile and dangerously powerful. And Nimrod in a fit of arrogance, which went beyond anything he had hitherto perpetrated, declared that he would himself mount up into heaven and dispose of the God of Abraham before worse befell. His wise men told him that the gap between heaven and earth was very great, so Nimrod ordered his fellows to erect an immensely high Tower to bridge the distance. They laboured three years. But, although Nimrod ascended it every day hoping to be able to launch his assault upon God, the sky from the summit never seemed to get appreciably closer. Urged on by Nimrod's unreasonable demands, the builders grew careless and the Tower collapsed. Thus frustrated, Nimrod sought another way of getting at God. He had made a large wooden box and to its four corners he attached ropes which he wedged into the beaks of four gigantic birds, named Rocs. They bore him, seated in this box, high into the sky. But as he neared the gates of heaven the box was upset by a gust of wind and Nimrod fell out on to a mountain top.

Frustrated a second time, he returned to the project of building a Tower, but without much confidence. The impetuosity of the builders was once more their undoing: the Tower collapsed burying Nimrod in its ruins. And this was the end of a visionary who had degenerated into a recognizable crank, a figure of fun.

And there is a *Caldean* version of the story in which Nimrod appears as an early *Babylonian* king who, filled with folly, led his people in an assault upon heaven, only to be frustrated by a whirlwind that swept them from the earth. But the ancient *Hebrews*, who were tireless in their elaboration of this theme, had another and grimmer version of it. In this account, Nimrod is represented as so *farouche* a character that even his followers drew back from his impieties. Deserted by his subjects, he determined to go it alone in his assault upon God. He constructed a bow of extraordinary dimensions and unusual power and with it he shot an arrow into the sky, aimed at God. The arrow fell to earth dripping with blood. But Nimrod did not survive his triumph. He collapsed upon the ground, and as he lay, too feeble to move, a host of ants devoured him.

The theme of this story is, then, a titanic assault upon heaven. In the most ancient versions of it, heaven is the abode of a somewhat severe God who is interested only in good and evil and is indisposed to make allowances for those who, not always lacking good intent, find it difficult to avoid the ordinary negligences of a human life. And it looks back to the Flood, the occasion when God demonstrated both his impatience with human depravity and his command over the destructive forces of Nature. Thus those who rebel against such a God are a people who do not see why they should have their delinquencies taken so seriously but wish only to avoid the consequences of depravity. They seek relief from a potentate in whose promises they have no faith. The story is concerned with avoiding a real or an imaginary reign of terror, and with the achievement of absolute security from the hostile powers of God and Nature. If, like Nietzsche, they could convince

themselves that this terrible God was already dead, they would (it is true) cease to feel themselves threatened. But they could be certain of the security they were seeking only if they had the assurance of his demise which belongs to a successful assassin. Nimrod is cast in this role of an heroic killer. There is no design to occupy heaven, which (in most of the versions of the tale) is no more than a reservoir of enormous proportions whose waters are held back only by a precarious God-controlled sluice; the aim is only to destroy it and its proprietor.

But even in ancient times the story of Babel was made to bear other, both deeper and more trivial, meanings. It pointed back beyond Noah and the Flood to that first, almost inadvertent, excess and the loss it entailed. It is a deformed expression of that nostalgic longing to be delivered from postlapsarian exile and to return to the Lost Garden: a loss which the record shows to have been occasioned not by a rebellious Adam but by his decent resolve to stand by his rather foolish wife who had been gulled by a slick encyclopaedia salesman into undertaking a purchase of knowledge that was beyond both their station and their means. For in some of the stories which revolve around Nimrod this dream of enjoying once more the peace and plenty of the legendary walled Garden has been transformed into a monstrous design to storm heaven itself. Nimrod is not a petty thief, like Prometheus; he is the leader of a cosmic revolution whose enterprise is not only doomed to failure but entails the destruction of all the virtues and consolations of the *vita temporalis*, a destruction of which the 'confusion of tongues' is the emblem. But, of course, the symbolic radiance of this tale does not compare with that which has been evoked from that brief encounter of God and man which constitutes the mysterious story of Cain.¹

In later times, Dante identified Nimrod as a deformed human being, a giant, who out of vanity made war upon heaven and in consequence confounded the conversation

¹ Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*.

of mankind. He is discovered in the ninth circle of the *Inferno*, a gibbering idiot forever blowing a tin trumpet: *O anima confusa*. In Ariosto's poem Nimrod appears appropriately as the ancestor of the loud-mouthed Rodomont, the most terrible of all the Saracens, and the inheritor of Nimrod's garment of invincibility (here depicted as a dragon's skin), the lack of which (he had carelessly left it hanging on Isabella's tomb) was to cause his downfall in his final encounter with Bradament. And, of course, the Nimrod who has come down to us is a mighty hunter, but characteristically (in the words of Montaigne) he loved only the prey and not the chase. More prosaically, Babel has been read as a commonplace tale of benevolent despotism: Nimrod is the first self-appointed Redeemer-King whose authority rested upon the stirred-up fears and resentments of his subjects. And Hegel, of course, goes back to the beginning. He recognizes the Hebrew story of the Flood as a rift between Man, God and Nature healed, only to be reopened in the tale of Nimrod. And he contrasts this story of Hebrew excess with the Greek story of Ducalion and Pyrrah. There, even the unexacting Zeus is finally exasperated by the rapacity of the human race and resolves to destroy mankind in a Flood. But Ducalion (a son of Prometheus) and Pyrrah, man and wife, on account of their uncommon virtue, are saved in a boat. And the regenerate race, which Zeus allows them to beget after the Flood has subsided, enjoys a golden age of harmony unbroken by the vulgar ambitions of a Nimrod; a harmony which gradually evaporated but which, before it did so, was perhaps caught up in the legend of Diana, that undemanding girl whose only wish, in the words of Chaucer, was

For to walken in the woodes wild.

However, borne upon the river of time, this tale of Babel and Nimrod, as it reaches our own age, has been told in a somewhat different idiom. The new features of the telling have, of course, their counterparts in the earlier versions; the change is one of emphasis. It is still detectably the same

story even if the *mis-en-scène* is different and the banalities of modernity qualify the heroism of ancient impiety.

3

In this version of the tale the curtain rises upon Babel, a city full of the bustle of getting and spending. A vast variety of enterprises is afoot; there is an endless proliferation of wants and satisfactions. The inhabitants are noted for their fickleness. The general atmosphere is one of moderate vulgarity. Art has degenerated into entertainment and the entertainments are apt to be crude. The Babelians have no spectacular vices, and no heroic virtues. They are easily seduced by novelty; if they had Madame de Sévigné's gift of introspection they too would exclaim: 'Dear God, how I love fashion.' They are self-absorbed and self-indulgent. It is indeed a City of Freedom: the home of every imaginable lib.

Yet a stranger come among them might have recognized them to be a difficult people. There is an undercurrent of discontent, an aimlessness and an absence of self-discipline. The Stoic and the martial virtues are notably absent from their character. They are a wayward rather than a listless people; and they are resentful of government, not as a wild and passionate people may be, but in the manner of spoilt children. Indeed, such order as there is among them has for so long been maintained by bribes, that this is the only kind of control they now tolerate. In short, Babel is a *civitas cupiditatis*, and its inhabitants, although not strikingly affluent, are a people devoted to affluence. From one point of view this tale of Babel is that of the nemesis of greed.

They are ruled by a young duke, Nimrod, who has recently succeeded to his father's estate and authority. In many respects he is a typical Babelian. The ducal family in which he had been brought up was a near replica of the city itself. From infancy his most casual wants have been waited

upon and his most wayward demands satisfied. And the deference to his desires which he had enjoyed as a child from his parents and tutors he naturally expects to receive from his people now that he has become their duke. But since their expectations are similar to his own (namely, the ready satisfaction of all *their* wants), and since these are without limit, duke and people find themselves pulling in somewhat different directions. This difficult situation may be said to have been potential in Babel ever since the time of the first duke, Ham; but the accession of a new ruler had brought it to a head. And Nimrod, impatient of the frustration it promised, addressed himself to the resolution of the conflict.

In the events that followed it is difficult to say exactly what part was played by the duke's determination to organize the activities of his people so that they should contribute to the satisfaction of his own limitless wants, and what part sprang from the greed of the Babelians. No doubt duke and people both believed themselves to be on to a good thing, and it may even be that the duke thought that his people would become more manageable if he appeared to be entering into a benevolent alliance with them. But what is certain is that these events could not have come about were it not for some important beliefs shared alike by duke and people.

It may be said of the Babelians that, like the Borgia Pope Alexander IV, they believed to a limited extent in almost everything. But their pragmatic disposition was anchored in what, for want of a better word, may be called some religious beliefs. In these God did not appear as the ruler of the inhabitants of the earth, pleased when they were well behaved and implacable towards wickedness, but as the proprietor of an estate situated above the skies. It was an estate of unimaginable wealth, reputed to contain all that was desirable in limitless profusion. The sun shone by day and the nights were as soft as velvet, lit always by the moon at the full. It was a world without winter. The trees were always in fruit; and through it there meandered a river of

wine. All that could be asked for was in instant and unlimited supply.

The proprietor of this miraculous estate was understood to be well disposed to the dwellers upon earth; indeed, he was recognized as the ultimate source of all their satisfactions and enjoyments, which (so to speak) were directly or indirectly the produce of his heavenly estate. He was known to have moods of capricious generosity when he would let down from heaven on a string a basket of figs or pomegranates from which lucky passers-by could help themselves. But he was known, also, to be of a somewhat stingy disposition, doling out enjoyments to human beings in a miserly fashion, whetting but never satisfying their appetites. In short, the earth was recognized to be a distinctly inferior part of the universe, a region of scarcity, and its inhabitants to be what the theologians called 'underprivileged'. Thus, the God of the Babelians was known as a close-fisted benefactor, the author of all their enjoyments but also of all their privations. And since, like spoilt children, they could not understand why they should ever be called upon to suffer privation, they were more resentful on account of what was withheld than grateful for what was given. These beliefs, shared by duke and people alike, were the soil in which Nimrod planted a seed that was to flower in a revolution in the Babelian way of life.

On the anniversary of his succession to the dukedom Nimrod held a durbar at which he made a long speech. He began by praising his people for the ingenuity with which they invented new wants and for their resource in satisfying them. The moderate affluence which lapped their lives was all their unaided achievement. But he was aware, also, of the privations they suffered and he went on to commiserate with them for their frustrations. He displayed himself as a man of limitless generosity but sadly restricted means. Indeed, his brains were of more use to them than his wealth. And he proceeded to show himself to be a man of large ideas.

I will not insult you [he said] by suggesting that you remedy your privations by engaging in any of the fashionable gnostic expedients, such as the manufacture of silicon chips. Nor do I suggest that you (and here he hastily corrected himself) that *we* should divert ourselves by building anything so irrelevant as a Dnieper Dam. Let us leave all that to others. Your dignity as Babelians demands a more radical recognition. For who is the real author of your frustrations? Who is it who has the means to put an end to your privations, to endow you with a limitless profusion of satisfactions, and does not do so? Is it not this miserly God who wantonly withholds what he might give with no loss to himself? Do you not deserve better than you receive? Are we not the innocent victims of a cosmic conspiracy? Or, if not this, then at least of a criminal distributive injustice?

This part of his speech Nimrod had to manage with some care because he might easily have lost the sympathy of his audience by over-balancing into manifest blasphemy. The Babelians were in many ways an unpretentious people, unaccustomed to having their dignity invoked. Moreover, ordinary men may grumble at their lot but they are slow to impugn their Gods even if they endow them with discreditable characters. Other peoples before and since have been incited to resent their exclusion from what has been called 'a place in the sun', but human discontent usually centres upon the lack of what others are seen to be enjoying and not upon totally imaginary satisfactions. But having prepared his audience for something unusual, he went on to confide in them an ambition which, he said, it was his dearest wish to achieve on behalf of his people, and the plan for its achievement which he had hatched with the aid of his faithful vizier.

The ambition was no less than that of forcing open the gates of heaven, dislodging this miserly deity from his estate and appropriating for the enjoyment of all Babelians

the limitless profusion of paradise. The plan was to build a Tower far into the sky from which this assault upon heaven should be launched. The speech ended with an exordium that clothed the project in the colours of a holy and profitable war.

When Philip, the father of Alexander the Great, announced an inordinate adventure it was said that his valet was wont to caution him: 'Philip, remember that you are mortal', which, of course, meant nothing so banal as, 'Remember that you will die.' But Nimrod, on this occasion, received no such reminder. Nevertheless, there was much in the character of the Babelians that would not dispose them to engage in so extravagant an enterprise. They had always preferred to arrive rather than to travel, and they would naturally have wished others to undertake it and that they would come in at the end to enjoy the fruits. They had their share in the Faustian preference for magic, but they had always regarded Aladdin as a lucky boy who had hit the jackpot, a piece of good fortune not to be looked for in respect of a whole people. Indeed, it is impossible to imagine any people seriously entertaining such a project unless they had been incited to do so by some masterful visionary, or that their embarking upon it would entirely allay the feeling that it was too good to be true and the suspicion that it must be a hoax. But be that how it may, when the sun went down a profound change had come over the people of Babel. Some would say that greed had defeated both indolence and sense; others that they had at last found a purpose in life to contain their waywardness and had raised themselves to the status of priests of an ideal.

The Babelians, then, were not a people who might have been, even briefly, uplifted by the glorious vision of tractors rumbling into the red sunset, all grievances swallowed up in the bleary rapture of comradeship devoted to the conduct of a white-hot technical revolution, either for its own sake or for its prospect of opulence. They were capable of envy and resentment; but what joined them was a

profound feeling of being alike 'deprived': allowed to have wishes but denied their immediate satisfaction. What they might seek, and now heard themselves being offered, was an 'alternative' to their circumstance at once recognizable (asking for no dispositional change in themselves) and so radical that even they could not expect it to be achieved overnight or without some effort.

4

Work on the Tower began without delay. A site of several acres in the middle of the city was cleared. And at once the consequences of the undertaking began to reveal themselves. A small part of the site was occupied by a sweet and tobacco shop, and when the bulldozers arrived to sweep it away, its elderly proprietor went to the city offices to protest and to claim compensation. He was a man of some address and brushed aside the counter girl's advice that he should submit his complaint in writing; he insisted upon seeing the clerk to the city. This official admitted that the situation was unprecedented and regretted that he had no power to stay the demolition, but he promised to bring the matter before his Council. Others damaged by the antinomian enthusiasm with which the new 'social purpose' of the Babelians was embraced resorted to the High Court; but their complaints received a dusty answer. In one celebrated judgement a distinguished Justice (named Lord Wensleydale) declared that when great works were afoot designed to increase the prosperity of all, private convenience must yield to public good. And this confirmation of the sovereignty of the *utilitas publica* terminated the civil history of Babel.

It is possible that had the inhabitants of the city been able to foresee what their engagement would entail, they might have started upon it with less enthusiasm. But, of course, these entailments only slowly revealed themselves. As at the beginning of a war the pattern of life changes but slowly, so in Babel the conditions of this undertaking to

invade and capture paradise only gradually became evident. Indeed, it was something like a twelvemonth before the Babelians began at all clearly to recognize themselves to be engaged upon an enterprise that called for the total mobilization of their resources. This City of Freedom was becoming a community and its inhabitants were in the process of acquiring a new communal identity in place of their former distinct individualities. But whether the identity was that of Heaven-Seekers, or merely of Tower-Builders, remained obscure.

The first year or more was a period in which enthusiasm for the project took many different forms. The Administration of the city took the lead. New postage stamps were issued depicting a tower, rather like the castle in a chess set. And before long new coins were minted with a tower on the obverse and Nimrod with a miniature tower in his hand on the reverse. After this, the obsession began to take hold. No people, least of all the Babelians, can feel itself seriously engaged without the engagement being translated into the terms of toy-making and 'show-business'. Plastic towers took the place of plastic gnomes in suburban gardens. The design of children's toys was invaded by the tower *motif*. Transfers depicting a tower were sold for the windscreens of motor cars, and stickers with slogans such as 'Up the Tower', 'Build for the People's Paradise' and 'Take the Waiting out of Wanting', for the back windows. The gingerbread buns which the children of Babel were accustomed to take to school were baked in the shape of a tower. And items such as *Steak à la Tour* and *Consommé Touraine* appeared on the menus of restaurants. The articles of brides' *trousseaux* had a tower embroidered upon them in the appropriate places. And, of course, 'tower' both as a noun and a verb, was endowed with an obvious secondary meaning. Turita became the popular name for girls, and Tar for boys.

These frivolities, however, gradually faded from the scene. One by one occupations and engagements extraneous to the undertaking disappeared, and the activi-

ties of the Babelians began to contract around a single centre. Their proverbial gaiety gave way to a spurious kind of gravity.

The children of Babel had never enjoyed very much in the way of schooling; life began early and it was concerned with the satisfaction of wants which called for little learning. Its university was a tribute to the culture of earlier times (Babel had not begun in barbarity), but learning was sought by only a few. And there was an art school presided over by an artist of distinction who had emigrated from Paris. But under the inspiration of the new 'social purpose' all this quickly revealed itself to the planners as the makings of an 'educational system' designed to impart (as a famous report put it) 'the skills and versatilities called for by the current engagement of the people of Babel'. A new A level subject called Tower Technology (TT for short) was introduced, a degree in Tower Studies was added to the curriculum of the university, and the School of Art was converted into a School of Industrial Design. But these were no more than early adventures in a transformation that was to leave nothing unchanged.

A people consecrated to the achievement of a perpetually rising so-called 'standard of life' is only a dim reflection of the devotion of the Babelians to a total satisfaction, not in instalments, but as a final reward. Those who did not themselves work on the Tower were devoted to the care of those who did. The collection of rations came to take the place of shopping. The distinction between rich and poor ceased to exist; all alike were pauperized. And, in the end, the only remaining use for money was to make bets in the betting shops on the next day's achievement of the builders, and to win or to lose entirely notional sums. Where there was only one subject of talk, imagination and language became impoverished. Newspapers degenerated before they were replaced by thrice-daily official bulletins on the progress of the Tower, broadcast on what, oddly, became known as the media. All conduct was recognized only in its relation to the enterprise. The words 'good' and

'bad', 'justice' and 'injustice' acquired restricted meanings appropriate to the circumstances: to each was affixed the adjective 'social'. And there emerged among the Babelians an *interimsethik* to match the character and the purported evanescence of the current manner of life.

As the obsession took hold, nobody was in doubt about why he was alive. Identity crises ceased to be fashionable; 'alienation' was a word of the past; the suicide rate dropped to nil. But some new diseases made their appearance. In one, which the doctors called *melancholia turita*, the sufferers, after displaying a variety of symptoms such as 'seeing towers' or believing that they were being raped or devoured by towers, usually ended with the conviction that they themselves had been transformed into towers – a veritable *Turmerlebnis*. Indeed, besides the Tower itself, the only building projects undertaken at this time were the construction of mental hospitals and clinics to deal with the proliferating anxieties the enterprise generated.

It was only to be expected that this new 'lifestyle' as it was called should meet with some resistance. It was made fun of by satirists; it was preached against by the pious; old-fashioned parents scoffed at it when their children came home from school filled with the latest lunacy; and there was still company in which a young man who had been awarded the Tower Medal (4th class) was ashamed to show his award. But this scepticism was combated by a barrage of propaganda. The liturgies of church services were revised, and a New Theology emerged, disseminated in pamphlets written by persons who came to be known as the Tower-Side Bishops, in which the doctrine of the Miser God was propounded. Even the early history of Babel was rewritten so that the past could be accommodated to the present.

Meanwhile the work proceeded apace. The foundations had been laid with care and only after the materials had been subject to exhaustive tests. Architects with plans stood beside masons and bricklayers, and overseers supervised the placing of every stone. The Tower was visited

every day by Nimrod who occasionally laid a ceremonial brick. Whatever the enormity of the enterprise, there was nothing negligent or slipshod in the manner in which it was pursued. And this care and concern extended far beyond the materials and techniques used in the construction of the Tower. Indeed, the very extravagance of the undertaking seemed to require that it should be endowed with an unusual degree of self-consciousness. What, however, it evoked was not reflection designed to accommodate the laboriousness of the undertaking to a native urge to grasp and enjoy immediate benefits, but an almost insatiable curiosity about the feelings and attitudes it generated. For example, the Tower had no sooner got off the ground, than an enquiry was begun to evaluate its scenic quality on a bipolar semantic-differential test and the results of this enquiry were, of course, quantified. And a whole industry emerged concerned with 'enquiries' about the opinions, the motives, the hopes and fears of the inhabitants of the city. Babel became a city of polls and questionnaires, conducted for the most part by schoolchildren sent out to gather this information from passers-by. The fact, for example, that 43 per cent of the girls between the ages of 16 and 18 preferred bricklayers to masons was thought to be so significant that the weekly variations of this figure were published. Thus the social purpose of the Babelians was under continuous uncritical scrutiny. Even the least enthusiastic citizen could hardly complain that the project was not being 'well researched'.

The Tower itself was a square structure, the inside of which was composed of a spiral stairway with periodic platforms and flanked by a wide continuously ascending slipway, the whole capacious enough to accommodate the movement of the engines of war to be used in the final assault upon heaven. Much thought had been given to the design of this military equipment and arsenals had been erected to produce and store it. Nobody knew what resistance the invasion would meet. God himself was conjectured to be pretty senile, needing only to be deprived

of his authority, evicted from his residence and sent to live in some suitable exile. But the mood of his retainers was expected to be hostile and their resources considerable. Heaven would not fall in a skirmish, and the policy laid down was that the invaders should be prepared for every imaginable emergency. While the builders were at work on the Tower, the assault troops were undergoing intensive training.

Years went by. As the Tower grew higher the shadow it cast on the city grew longer. After the first months of enthusiasm, the tempo of the work settled to a less exciting norm, and the work itself became a professional undertaking. And in the course of time there emerged persons who transferred their obsession to the Tower itself. They wished to demolish the work that had been done in order to embark on the construction of a better designed Tower. There was, then, some danger that their purpose might be forgotten and that Babel would become a city of beavers merely responding to an acquired disposition to lay one stone upon another. Indeed, there is one version of the story that has this undramatic ending, with Babelians degenerating into a nation of idiot tower-builders.

Moreover, the adventure Nimrod had set afoot was threatened from another direction. It is fair to say that the inhabitants of Babel never had any very clear ideas about the heavenly estate they were preparing to invade, and their theologians were, for the most part, silent on this matter, preferring to dwell upon the enormities of its miserly proprietor and the justice of his projected expropriation. Thus while the Babelians had set out upon their task as a people of many wants and had thought of paradise as a place where these wants would all be instantly satisfied, their devotion to their task had changed them into a people of but a single want – to get to heaven. But as the Tower grew, study groups were formed and gathered to listen to teach-ins designed to reveal what was to be expected. It is true that these meetings became little more

than competitions in imagining new wants and imagining their satisfaction, but even so they did something to defend the Babelians from the final frustration of entering paradise and finding they had no wants to satisfy.

And the somewhat fanciful proceedings of these classes for adults had their counterpart elsewhere. Young people, preparing for what they were beginning to hope was not a life of toil, controlled by what were called 'man-power budgets', but a life of fulfilment, formed fraternities – groups who would enter paradise together in the wake of the invading armies and explore its promise of profusion. They were tired of all this talk about Tower Technology, they were tired of being told about the ingenious experiments that had been set up by a farsighted Babelian to produce the perfect bricklayer in a process of psychological conditioning. They wished only to dream of the future. So it was natural for these young people, who (unlike their elders) would not totter into paradise exhausted by their exertions, to form groups of their own, sodalities for the rehearsal of the life to come – free from consideration of likelihood and unhindered by the conditions of probability. These fraternities represented what was perhaps the last remnant of light-hearted fun in the anxious circumstances of the Babelians.

But while all these preparations were being made the courage of the inhabitants of the city was severely tested. Building materials began to run short. The supply of clay for bricks was beginning to be exhausted and the quarries had been worked until they had little more to yield. In these circumstances, the Babelians, led by Nimrod himself, determined to play their last card. Beginning with the ducal palace, the buildings of the city were demolished to supply materials for the Tower, and before many months had passed Babel became a place of tents and caravans, of cave-dwellers and inhabitants of holes in the ground.

However, it was now thought that, whatever there might be to follow, the Tower would soon be finished. The summit had long since been far out of sight to spectators on

the ground and it was many hours' climb for the builders to reach their place of work. There was room now for but few on the job. The numbers of the unemployed had, of course, increased, and Babel was fast becoming a city of idlers. As with a civilization that has sold itself to machines, all were sustained, but now only a privileged few had work. But the bulletins were optimistic; confidence ran high; the last remaining critics and doubters fell silent. That spring the farmers sowed no wheat in the belief that before harvest time they would be in paradise feasting upon what would have cost them no labour. The not-unmeaty bone which the Babelians had been used to gnaw with relish had been dropped into the stream of time and they were groping for its magnified reflection.

In these days, Nimrod, often accompanied by his vizier, used to mount the Tower in the morning before the sun was up and spend the whole day upon the summit, returning only when darkness fell. Sometimes he had the air of a general planning a battle upon which he must soon engage. He gazed up and around as if he were looking for footholds for his men on the smooth surface of the sky. At other times he was observed by the workmen to be sunk in thought, communing with himself, oblivious of his surroundings. He would be heard talking to himself in words they did not understand. He would seem to fall into a trance, his eyes open but seeing nothing. He was very far from being the *farouche* character of other versions of the story, ready to shoot an arrow at God should he come within range, or the endlessly optative character of his youth. Indeed, he had become a rather sad and withdrawn person, gentler than in time past, and perhaps beginning to be apprehensive of a future which now seemed close. The workmen got used to this, and beyond thinking that he might be going a bit queer in the head and hoping that this was not the case, they paid him little attention: the greed for the satisfactions of paradise had, particularly with the bricklayers, been transformed into the project of building a Tower. Sometimes when lunchtime came round and Nimrod seemed to be

more than usually abstracted they would prompt him to open his packet of sandwiches, but they could not conceal from themselves that he was a changed man. And this went also for the Babelians in general. The years spent on this single, supreme project, marked by no interim satisfactions or opportunities (such as an annual harvest-home or the beginning of the fishing season) to break the monotony, had taken their toll in emotional stress. They were supported only by a distant and precarious vision of limitless loot.

Confidence in the nobility of a long and difficult enterprise may go far to sustain its pursuit, and it may even make its collapse endurable. Indeed, an illusion of nobility may suffice. But those who invest all their energies and hopes in an undertaking even tinged with depravity are bound to its success and are apt to acquire an obscure self-contempt which qualifies their faith, first in their fellows, and then in themselves. And after their long effort a vague mistrust of this kind had begun to seep into the mood of the Babelians. Emotionally exhausted and joined in a dread of failure, large numbers of them now virtually unemployed and with time for endless chatter, they began to find it difficult to believe that none would reveal his exhaustion in some fatally damaging conduct.

That such an enterprise should breed scroungers was only to be expected – Babelians had never been notably dutiful. But what now disturbed them was the suspicion that there might be some who were preparing to steal a march on their fellows when the time of fulfilment arrived, even if it were only buying an advantage from the officers whose duty it would be to marshal the final ascent into heaven. Or worse, there emerged a suspicion that they might all turn out to be dupes of a confidence trick designed for the benefit of others than themselves. Or were they, perhaps, the credulous victims of an illusion? Who was it who had said that all this talk of paradise was no more than a shot of opium to keep the masses quiet?

To the ordinary inhabitant of Babel, Nimrod was now a

shadowy figure. He was to be seen only on his daily visits to the summit of the Tower. For years they had identified themselves with the enterprise and with their duke, its author. They were not disposed to doubt his wisdom or competence, but the gossip of those who worked at the summit caused them to reflect. What was he doing up there all day long? To whom was he speaking when he seemed to be speaking to himself? Was he already in communication with the angels in heaven? And if so, what did this portend? And sitting in the cave-like dwellings they had come to occupy, a seed of unspecified doubt was sown in their minds. Some, a prey to hardly formulated suspicions, would get up early in the morning to watch the duke enter the Tower; others would wait in the evening for his return, relieved when he appeared and even reassured when he wished them a civil 'good evening'.

But vague suspicions not decisively laid to rest are apt to grow and take more precise shapes. People looked at one another out of the corners of their eyes, ashamed to utter what was in their minds. Heads nodded and then tongues began to wag. At length their vague suspicions became explicit doubts. Could it be that Nimrod, their trusted duke, who was already holding conversations (from which they were excluded) with the angels in heaven, was planning to play them false? Could it be that he was making arrangements himself to sneak into heaven, leaving them behind? How else account for his conduct of late? And all the native mistrust of a people whose deepest emotions (whatever they had foregone to satisfy them) were greed and resentment, rose up to confirm this doubt about their leader. The suspicion, inseparable from excess, blossomed.

There was, however, little they could do to frustrate him if, indeed, this was what Nimrod was planning. A deputation waited upon him. Ostensibly to ask for the latest information, but really to get him talking so that he might inadvertently divulge himself. But the result was inconclusive. All that could be done was to brief the few builders now at the summit about their suspicions, to tell them to

keep their eyes open and to report any new untoward circumstance, and themselves to keep watch on his movements.

Things continued thus for some weeks. And then, one evening, the self-appointed watchers were at first disconcerted and then deeply disturbed when the duke did not appear at the exit of the Tower at the expected time. It was an evening in late June. Fraternities of adolescents (gathered at the foot of the Tower) were gaily rehearsing their entrance into paradise; idlers were standing at what had once been street corners. All the normal muted evening life was afoot. The doorway of the Bricklayers' Arms (left standing as a concession to vulgar habits) was crowded with drinkers enjoying the last of the beer (the breweries had been shut down). Darts players were chalking up the score. Mothers were rounding up their children for bed. In a quandary about what to do, the watchers waited at their posts. But at last they could contain their apprehension no longer. A shout and the alarm was raised. The course of recent events left nobody in doubt about what was happening and of the urgency of the situation. It was as if a trumpet had been blown.

People came running from all quarters of the city in panic fear that they were about to be deprived of what they had spent themselves to get. The slogan 'Take the Waiting out of Wanting' had bitten deep into their consciousness. There was a brief council of war: the scarcely coherent accounts of what was happening were carried away by the breeze; incitements to act were unnecessary. Although nothing had been planned or rehearsed, all knew what to do. In a moment the entrance to the Tower was filled with running men, women and children. Pounding up the stairway, led by the more agile among them, the entire population of Babel rushed on to snatch the reward of their labours from the hands of a man who they were now convinced was at this moment sneaking into paradise without them, having made a personal arrangement with its proprietor.

It is not to be thought that there were not some among

them who were a little ashamed at this wild exhibition of suspicion that might yet turn out to be unfounded. But these reassured themselves by thinking that if, when they reached the summit of the Tower, they were met by a grave and meditative duke preparing, a little later than usual, to descend for the night, they might turn their panic rush into a demonstration of confidence in him, putting smiles on their faces instead of grimaces of hostility, and pretending that they had come to honour him. But if such thoughts flashed through the minds of some, they did not impede the upward rush of the now silent crowd who had breath only for the climb.

The first massive surge spent itself. The climbers thinned out. The elderly fell back; the young went to the front. But there was none who did not keep moving as if his salvation depended on it. The Tower was now so high that the van of climbers would not reach the top until even the most dilatory of the Babelians had set foot on the bottom step of the stairway. Indeed, the leaders were not halfway up before the entire population of Babel was already inside, and the Tower itself had become like the containing banks of a river in spate. Some, made giddy by the spiralling ascent, collapsed and were trampled underfoot; others, pausing to catch their breath at one of the window slits, were crushed against the wall. And the confusion increased when the military formations who had been trained to lead the assault upon heaven arrived late (their barracks being on the outskirts of the city) and tried to overrun the disorganized mass of climbers.

The ascent narrowed as it went, and by the time those in front were reaching the summit an enormous pressure had been built up inside the Tower. It swayed as if it had been struck by a hurricane. And as the din of the oncoming crowd reached the ears of Nimrod, the floor upon which he stood trembled and the stones which the builders were engaged in fixing slipped from their places.

Then, with the infinite slowness with which the spectators of a distant mountain landslide see the earth beginning

to move and hardly believe their eyes, the top of the Tower subsided. There was not much clatter. It was like a tired man falling asleep as he stands, first swaying a little, then bending at the knees, and finally falling upon his face with a scarcely audible sigh of relief.

But the collapse of the summit imparted itself to the Tower below. Soon the whole structure had become a raging cataract of falling stones; mangled bodies, first borne upon its surface, became submerged in its depths. The collapse went on far into the night and threw up an enormous cloud of dust. None had an opportunity to turn back; escape from the wreckage was impossible. There were no survivors (not even a crippled boy who could not keep up with the Pied Piper) left to wonder whether or not the suspicions that had brought about the disaster had been, after all, fanciful; none to consider whether the calamity was not inherent in the project. What had been designed as a stairway to paradise had become the tomb of an entire people, not perished in a confusion of tongues, but the victims of a delusion and confounded by the distrust which dogs those who engage in titanic exploits. And when the dawn came what had once been the city of Babel was a silent lunar landscape in which nothing moved.

Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretched far away.

Many centuries later, when the site of this city, long the abode of lizards and overgrown with purple asphodel, became the object of archaeological curiosity, an excavator turning over a weather-worn stone, came upon an inscription: one of those pathetic messages that sometimes greet us from the past. Evidently it had been composed and incised by a Babelian poet who had lived in the early years of the city's obsession with the bottomless abundance of paradise. It foreboded nothing; it was not a premonition of disaster, but a forlorn comment on the engagement itself.

On being deciphered it read:

Those who in fields Elysian would dwell
Do but extend the boundaries of hell.