

THE ROMANTIC MYTHOLOGY OF LANGUAGE

Respect for language, as everyone acknowledges, is a constant of French culture. It is no less clear, however, that the appraisal of language and of its powers and the notion formed of its essential nature vary from epoch to epoch. Intense philosophical, scientific and literary preoccupation with language and the age-old problems it raises is undoubtedly one of the most significant characteristics of pre-romanticism. The traditional respect for language, manifest in discussions of inversion and of the importance of signs in the formation of ideas, is gradually transformed, when these discussions have run their course, into a cult of language in general and of the word in particular. Indeed, by much insistence on the primordial importance of language in the act of knowledge, thinkers such as Locke and Condillac, and after them Voltaire, Diderot, Maupertuis, Rousseau, Garat, and many others,¹ eventually endow the instrument of thought with an autonomy that thought itself, subjugated by matter, was in danger of losing. "Ah! Monsieur", exclaims Diderot,

¹ The nominalism of Locke (*An Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk. III 'Of Words') is the starting-point, rather unpromising at first sight, of the attitudes to language here considered. His direct influence can be found even among the Illuminists. Cf. Saint-Martin, *Le Crocodile*, Paris An VII, p. 285.

The Romantic Mythology of Language

“combien notre entendement est modifié par les signes.”² Minds seem to pass, at this critical moment of European reflection, from a purely intellectual conception of language—which, moreover, the *Grammaire de Port-Royal* barely distinguished from logic—to a mythological conception of its principal functions.

Writers in the second half of the eighteenth century, though frequently at variance on other grounds, rally curiously around certain conceptions of language. They are in agreement too with scientific philology, just then coming into being, though without always having direct knowledge of it, in recognizing in language yet another phenomenon to be accounted for solely in terms of its primitive forms. The notion emerges of a primitive language, whose vogue is well known in German romanticism,³ but whose importance has not perhaps been sufficiently stressed for French literature. The empiricism of Condillac and the Illuminism of Saint-Martin both locate one of the highest points in man's creativity at the moment of the birth of language. Condillac, while stressing the role of sensation and of gesture in the formation of language, and of intellectual analysis in its later developments, does not fail however to celebrate the prodigious energy, the musical and poetic qualities of the earliest language.⁴ For Rousseau the ‘cri de la nature’ is no less an ‘art sublime,’ severed from original music by the unfortunate agency of history.⁵ Likewise Saint-Martin, throughout his voluminous

² *Lettre sur les sourds et muets* (1759) in *Oeuvres*, I, Paris 1875, p. 369. On the passionate interest of Condillac, Rousseau, d'Alembert, Voltaire, and Diderot in the problem of the formation of languages, see F. Venturi, *Jeunesse de Diderot*, Paris 1939, Ch. VIII. From their often very bold speculations, they tend to conclude in favour of the contemporaneity and the reciprocal action of sign and idea. See also P. Salvucci, *Linguaggio e mondo umano in Condillac*, Urbino 1957, p. 7-27.

³ P. Kluckhohn, *Das Ideengut der deutschen Romantik*, Tübingen 1953, p. 172-174.

⁴ Condillac, *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines*, I, 2, Ch. IV ‘Que l'usage des signes est la vraie cause des progrès de l'imagination, de la contemplation, et de la mémoire.’ Cf. ‘J'ai vu dans le langage d'action le germe des langues et de tous les arts qui peuvent servir à exprimer nos pensées’ (Ch. XIII).

⁵ *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755). If Rousseau owes to Condillac the essentials of his views of language, he is ‘convaincu de l'impossibilité presque démontrée que les langues aient pu naître et s'établir par des moyens purement humains’ (*ibid.*). See also his *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Geneva 1781, Ch. IV, XII-XIV.

work, emphasizes the virtualities of the primitive language, which he also identifies with primitive music.⁶

Indispensable in the act of cognition, language rapidly passes to the status of a gnosis or an oracle. Since Leibniz and Vico, both rather inclined to transform problems of history into linguistic problems, there had been a growing tendency to consider language, especially in so far as it retained some vestiges of its original state, as source of supreme knowledge. It is precisely because of his faith in a primitive language, conceived as the repository of the first principles of all sciences, that Charles de Brosses preaches a return 'jusqu'aux racines' and, despite the well known derisions of Voltaire, undertakes to restore etymology to its erstwhile function of 'discours véritable.'⁷ Court de Gébelin's response to the challenge was his projected collection of etymologies, which would be 'un abrégé de toutes les sciences.'⁸

Court de Gébelin, although always at a pre-scientific level, marks the transition in France from an intellectual conception of language to the historical outlook and the comparative method of the nineteenth century. In his use of them, the terms 'grammaire universelle' and 'langue primitive' overlap for at least a large portion of their meaning. But he accumulates historical data, and explores them in his fashion, in order better to eliminate history. In many a passage of *Le Monde primitif* he insists upon the need to free languages from the habits of intellectual analysis which have encroached upon them and, in order to rediscover their original powers, he recommends the compilation of a 'dictionnaire primitif,' containing the 'débris de la langue primitive.'⁹ Etymology, he explains, will restore

⁶ See *L'Homme de Désir*, Lyons 1790, p. 80; *Des Erreurs et de la Vérité*, Edinburgh 1775, p. 506. Cf. Senancour, *Rêveries sur la nature primitive de l'homme*, Paris 1939, II, p. 145.

⁷ Ch. de Brosses, *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues et des principes physiques de l'étymologie*, Paris 1765, I, p. VIII, 30. 'Nul doute que les premiers noms ne fussent convenables à la nature des choses qu'ils expriment.'

⁸ *Le Monde primitif*, Paris 1778, I, p. 6. Cf. Ch. de Brosses: 'Les mots sont les fondements de la science, leur examen découvre ces fondements' (*op. cit.*, I, p. 48).

⁹ *Op. cit.*, I, p. 21. Cf. 'Cette langue se retrouve dans toutes' (p. 34). Saint-Martin is equally persuaded that the primitive language will be preserved 'même après le monde'; for it is 'une langue universelle et impérissable' (*Des Erreurs*, p. 467).

the ancient vigour of language, straightway revealing 'la valeur qu'avaient obscurcie la longueur des siècles et les altérations successives des langues.'¹⁰ His intention, therefore, is to redeem the degenerate languages of history by a renewed participation in the creative energies of man's first speech. This same ambition, which is conspicuously present in the poetic theories of the nineteenth century, finds its way even into official philology, at least in certain vulgarizations of comparative linguistics.¹¹

As extravagant as it may now appear to us, this late eighteenth century linguistics is decisive for the coming generation. From the works of Saint-Martin, the traditionalists, in particular Joseph de Maistre and Pierre-Simon Ballanche, draw the essentials of their linguistic theories,¹² and Lamennais at least the tone of his resounding *Paroles*. Similarly, Court de Gébelin's *Le Monde primitif*, in which Baldensperger saw 'la jonction idéologique entre Vico et les grands idéo-réalistes qui ont permis au XX^e siècle de faire son oeuvre,'¹³ has left its mark on Lamartine's *Chute d'un ange*, Senancour's *Réveries*, and on the biblical poetry of Alfred de Vigny.¹⁴ Indeed, Saint-Martin, Court de Gébelin, and the eighteenth century occultists are at the source of a 'secrète tradition' perpetuated by Senancour, Nerval, Lamartine, Hugo. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the official science of language, that of the Joneses, the Schlegels, the Bopps, far better known than is usually thought, should be included—in the words of Ballanche himself—among the muses to be henceforth invoked; for it too seems to bear the promise of a special initiation.¹⁵ Indeed, as will be apparent from what follows, the illuminist and the scientific enquiries into language are frequently complementary sources of literary inspiration.

We shall not be concerned here with the impulse given by pre-scientific linguistics to comparative method, which had fallen into discredit since Guillaume Postel, only to be revived by

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, II, p. 4.

¹¹ Historical linguistics seemed to imply an infinite regression in time and renewed participation in the creation of language.

¹² A. Viatte, *Les Sources occultes du romantisme*, Paris 1928, II, p. 83.

¹³ "Court de Gébelin et l'importance de son 'Monde primitif'" in *Mélanges offerts à Edmond Huguet*, Paris 1940, p. 325.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

¹⁵ *Oeuvres*, Paris 1859, IV, p. 259.

Brosses and Court de Gébelin, by Parsons and finally by William Jones, who is nowadays far better known than his bold precursors. Nor shall we consider what names were provisionally chosen for the primitive language whose discovery or reconstruction seemed so close at hand; 'on sait que les hébraïsants, les partisans du Sanscrit, ceux du Chaldéen se disputèrent longtemps le pas sur ce point.'¹⁶ Suffice it to notice that the 'époque Court de Gébelin'¹⁷ passed on to romanticism the possibility of a new mythology of language, by extolling an exemplary primitive language situated beyond the categories of logical discourse and endowed with all the perfections of a Golden Age.

CRITIQUE OF LANGUAGE

The romantics seem to have discovered at the same time as professional linguists that languages have nothing absolute about them, that they are evolutionary phenomena, and follow the fatal laws of becoming. They view languages in the religious perspective of a 'fall,' and willingly adopt the stand-point of the mystic who, in the presence of the ineffable, can only stammer out a travesty of his thought as soon as he has recourse to common speech.

Senancour¹⁸ and Ballanche, having learnt from Saint-Martin to anathematize the 'langues transmises et traditionnelles (qui) n'engendrent rien',¹⁹ are equally haunted by the inexorable becoming of language. Victor Hugo, drawing inspiration no doubt from his friend Charles Nodier—and taking a stand against the opinions expressed by Garat in the *Dictionnaire* of 1798, where it was a question of 'fixing' the language—writes in 1827 his celebrated comparison of languages with the sea: 'Elles oscillent sans cesse. A certains temps, elles quittent un rivage du monde de la pensée et en envahissent un autre. Tout ce que leur flot déserte ainsi, sèche et s'efface du sol. C'est de cette façon que

¹⁶ *Magasin encyclopédique*, 1798.

¹⁷ See R. Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris 1950, p. 184. 'Cette fièvre linguistique, étymologique surtout' is brought on by the hopes of the previous half-century of finding in language a key to the ontological problem.

¹⁸ See in particular *Réveries*, II, p. 147.

¹⁹ *De l'Esprit des choses*, Paris, An VIII, II, p. 228.

The Romantic Mythology of Language

les idées s'éteignent, que les mots s'en vont. Il en est des idiomes humains comme de tout. (...) Qu'y faire? cela est fatal'.²⁰ Accordingly, in merely human languages 'le Verbe n'a pas un mot qui ne bégaie'²¹; 'le vil langage humain n'a pas d'apothéoses.'²² In 1834, while Nodier is pondering over the transcendental languages projected by Dalgarno, Wilkins and Leibniz, Hugo likewise demands 'une langue forgée pour tous les accidents possibles de la pensée,'²³ perhaps recalling also the 'langue philosophique' sought after by Joseph de Maistre²⁴ or the 'langue du ciel' to which Lamartine aspired.²⁵

Indeed, Lamartine is no less convinced than Hugo of the blind fatality of a 'langage borné (qui) change avec les climats ou passe avec les temps.'²⁶ He had even attributed a poetic silence to the impotence of language. 'Comment contenir l'infini dans ce bourdonnement,' fashioned 'par l'usage pour les besoins de communication du vulgaire des hommes?'²⁷ Having on numerous occasions renounced the 'verbes d'ici-bas,'²⁸ he continues, right up to the *Cours familier* of 1856, to demand 'une langue supérieure à la langue usuelle.' Perhaps the 'verbe suprême' is 'une langue sans mots.'²⁹ But it is too easy to multiply examples of this old cry of the mystic,³⁰ which any writer, moreover, is likely to borrow at any period. It remains true, however, that during the

²⁰ *Préface to Cromwell*.

²¹ *La Légende des siècles*: 'La Trompette du jugement'.

²² Quoted by Renouvier, *Victor Hugo le philosophe*, p. 346.

²³ *Littérature et philosophie mêlées*, 1834, p. XXXVI. A new ideal language had been on the programme of the Revolution, so eager for beginnings. At the National Convention of 1795 citizen Delormel presented a 'Projet d'une langue universelle.' Contemporary enthusiasm for universal grammar—Volney was to found a prize to encourage this study—is sustained by well developed utopian hopes.

²⁴ *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Paris 1821, I, p. 77.

²⁵ *Premières méditations*: 'Dieu' (*Oeuvres poétiques*, Paris 1919, IV, p. 169).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Preface to the *Méditations* (*Oeuvres poétiques*, IV, p. XIV); he returns to this theme in the preface to the *Nouvelles méditations*.

²⁸ Cf. *Jocelyn*, 'Deuxième Epoque,' l. 120, and the 'concerts muets' of the *Harmonies poétiques* (*Oeuvres poétiques*, II, p. 2).

²⁹ *Recueils poétiques* (*Oeuvres poétiques*, VI, p. 227).

³⁰ Cf. Joseph de Maistre, *Les Soirées*, I, p. 76; Ballanche, *Esquisse d'une philosophie*, I, p. XXIII, 54 ff.; *La Vision d'Hébal*, p. 31 ff.; Balzac, *Louis Lambert* (*Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1892, V, p. 118); Soumet, *La Divine Epopée*, Paris 1840, p. 11; etc.

romantic period this commonplace theme of the inadequacy of language betrays a very real and deep disquiet. If the causes of this disquiet are not perfectly clear, its effects are unmistakable in the actual linguistic revolution which historians of language and literature date at around 1830.³¹ And it is precisely this disquiet which furnishes one of the conditions in which a properly romantic mythology of language was to be elaborated.

‘SAINT LANGAGE’

As understood by romanticism, language can on occasion constitute an opening on to a sacred time, in particular—to borrow the vocabulary of Mircea Eliade—the *illud tempus*, the ‘mythical time.’ By returning to the primitive language, or to what Saint-Martin calls *les langues vives*,³² which maintain its essential elements, we participate anew in a kind of original grace: ‘Les langues spirituelles et divines nous transmettraient naturellement le sens et la vie qu’elles possèdent.’³³ In two hundred pages of the *Ministère de l’Homme-Esprit* Saint-Martin proclaims the holiness of the spoken word,³⁴ its ‘incommensurable et miséricordeuse puissance,’³⁵ and above all the ‘région lumineuse’ to which it leads.³⁶

According to a theory debated among the eighteenth century empiricists, the sign is prior to the idea, seeing that the generalization on which every idea depends exists only by virtue of the sign. In the limiting case of paradoxes of this kind, the sign creates the idea. It remained for the Illuminists, or rather for the romantics, to envisage the final consequences of the principle thus laid down. ‘Les signes,’ according to Saint-Martin, ‘se

³¹ Ferdinand Brunot, *Histoire de la langue française*, T. XIII *L’Epoque romantique* (Charles Bruneau), p. 233.

³² *De l’Esprit des choses*, II, p. 231.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Le Ministère de l’homme-esprit*, Paris An X-1802, p. 448. Cf. ‘Chantons la gloire de la parole humaine... la résurrection de la parole de l’homme... Ils douteraient encore que cette parole fût Dieu même!’ (*L’Homme de désir*, p. 279.

³⁵ p. 320.

³⁶ p. 351.

The Romantic Mythology of Language

présentent avant les idées,³⁷ and he concludes—with Rousseau, whom he is actually following—that ‘la parole avait été nécessaire pour l’institution de la parole.’³⁸ There is no need to insist upon the well known elaboration of this thought among the traditionalists, nor upon the paradox: ‘L’homme pense sa parole avant de parler sa pensée,’ which, in Bonald’s mind, excluded every possibility of the human invention of speech, and made of language a luminous, autonomous, divine being, to which man and the world owed their respective illuminations: ‘La parole est la lumière distincte du soleil, et sans laquelle il ne pourrait frapper mes regards.’³⁹ A similar belief in the anteriority of signs was natural for Hugo: ‘Du sphinx Esprit Humain le mot sait le secret.’⁴⁰

Bonald’s conclusions recur also in Ballanche and de Maistre, who believe furthermore that confirmation is provided for them by the new science of language: ‘Les vastes investigations de M. Schlegel et de M. William Jones nous ouvrent,’ Ballanche claims, ‘les trésors de cette sorte de cosmogonie intellectuelle qui est toute dans les langues.’⁴¹ Language is a perpetual gnosis: ‘Le don primitif de la parole n’a pas cessé d’être l’origine de nos connaissances,’ ‘une sorte de prescience.’⁴²

Belief in the divine origin of language is wide-spread among the romantics. Senancour, an avid reader of Saint-Martin, seems to have acquired from the *Esprit des choses* his sense of the holiness of the word: ‘La parole est sainte,’ he says in the *Libres Méditations* of 1819, ‘la profaner, c’est rentrer volontairement dans les ténèbres’⁴³; to which the 1830 edition adds in proof of an unaltered sense of awe: ‘Ne prostituez pas cette ressource

³⁷ *Le Crocodile*, p. 292. See ‘Chant 70’ *passim*.

³⁸ *L’Homme de désir*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Oeuvres*, Paris 1859, I, *Législation primitive* (1802), p. 1071. It is worth noticing that in 1826 *Le Globe* analyses in some detail the linguistic theories of Bonald in an article of the 18th Feb. entitled ‘De l’histoire de la philosophie en France au XIX^e siècle’ (Tome III, p. 128-131).

⁴⁰ *Les Contemplations*, VIII ‘Suite,’ l. 14.

⁴¹ *Essais sur les institutions sociales*, Paris 1818, p. 344.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 347; *Paléogénésie sociale* (*Oeuvres*, IV), p. 194. In Vico, ‘l’un des esprits les plus pénétrants qui aient jamais existé’ (*ibid.*, p. 165), whom he has been reading since 1824, he finds ample confirmation of the prophetic quality of language. See *ibid.*, p. 193.

⁴³ p. 325.

féconde, cette communication illimitée, cette mobile figure de ce qui ne changera jamais.⁴⁴ Lamartine too, while acknowledging that man has been able to 'reconstruire des langues postérieures et imparfaites avec les débris de la langue primitive et parfaite,'⁴⁵ insists at length that the latter is 'un don divin.' In this matter, however, Hugo outdoes his contemporaries and comes curiously close to an Indian, possibly Indo-European, attitude, by giving the word complete independence of created things and submitting even the divine will to the power of the word. Thus, the doubts which he entertained in 1854 concerning the origin of the word:

Le mort, le terme, type on ne sait d'où venu,
Face de l'invisible, aspect de l'inconnu;
Créé, par qui? forgé, par qui? jailli de l'ombre;

far from preventing the celebrated apotheosis, even seem from the argument of this poem to have demanded it. The irreducible being that the word is can only be explained by itself alone. Endowed with absolute power the word, in this rather fanciful Christianity, is no mere gift, not even a divine one: 'le mot, c'est Dieu.'⁴⁶ Indeed, the famous line 'Car le mot, c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe, c'est Dieu' rather suggests the tribute of some Vedic bard.

In seventeenth century classicism language is a means of expressing thought and, on occasion, of adorning it. For romanticism, on the other hand, language, inasmuch as it is an initiative and a will superior to thought, is a continual gnosis or, especially with Victor Hugo, an attack on the absolute. If romantic poetry arrogates to itself the same rights, it is because it brings into force a kind of redeemed language, a language whose strictly regulated character enhances its solemn powers of conjuration. Whence the tendency, as marked among the French romantics as among their German predecessors, to equate lyrical poetry and primitive language. 'La poésie,' Ballanche writes, 'est la

⁴⁴ p. 445.

⁴⁵ *Cours familier de littérature*, Paris 1856, p. 84.

⁴⁶ *Les Contemplations*: 'Pleurs dans la nuit.' But there are also 'mots farouches,' 'syllabes redoutables,' and especially 'mots monstres' (see 'Suite'). Experience of the sacred being notoriously ambivalent, there is nothing especially astonishing about such contradictory appraisals. One recalls Renouvier's judgment: 'C'est un mélange d'admiration, de vénération, et de stupéfaction. Le mot culte ne dit rien de trop pour exprimer ce qu'il sent de cette chose: le mot' (*Victor Hugo le poète*, Paris 1921, p. 83-84).

The Romantic Mythology of Language

parole primitive, révélée à l'homme⁴⁷; 'Le verbe transcendant,' according to Lamartine, 's'est incarné dans les vers'⁴⁸; while for Hugo, naturally, the poetic prayer always retains the character of a sacred *logos*.

THE PRESTIGE OF SANSKRIT

Saint-Martin, seeing in Anquetil-Duperron's *Oupnek'bat* and the *Asiatic Researches* emanating from Calcutta an initiation into the arcana of the oldest spirituality, is perhaps the first in France to direct the attention of amateurs towards Oriental languages. The prestige which the ancient language of India eventually acquired in the literary milieux of Europe is well known since Raymond Schwab's classic study, which abundantly complements the few testimonies that follow.

The earliest interpretations of Indian data are curiously imbued with the nostalgia for some primitive language. The interest in India which Chateaubriand exhibits in his *Révolutions anciennes et modernes* has nothing ephemeral about it. 'La langue sanscrite ou sacrée (qui) vient d'être révélée au monde' and which he has learnt to admire in 'Robertson's Indie' is 'une langue primitive, source de toutes celles de l'Orient.'⁴⁹ As Schwab has clearly shown, Sanskrit crops up unexpectedly at many a critical point in Chateaubriand's apologetics.⁵⁰ Senancour, for whom no knowledge was more necessary to contemporary man than 'celle des premiers principes des langues et de leur source commune,' draws from his reading of Anquetil-Duperron the conclusion that 'la connaissance du Zend, du Pelhvi, du Samskretan (...) ne sont que les premiers pas pour parvenir à l'alphabet primitif imaginé de nos jours.'⁵¹ Fabre d'Olivet, following eagerly in the steps of Saint-Martin, quotes abundantly from the *Asiatic Researches* in the course of his quest of antediluvian tongues,⁵² and the

⁴⁷ *Essai sur les institutions sociales*, p. 310.

⁴⁸ *Cours familier*, I, p. 245.

⁴⁹ W. Robertson, *An Historical Disquisition* (1791) is the source of Chateaubriand's information. See Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 68-69.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68-70.

⁵¹ *Réveries*, I, p. 216 note.

⁵² See *La Langue hébraïque restituée*, Paris 1815: 'Le samscrit (...) est la langue la plus parfaite que les hommes aient jamais parlée' (I, p. XVI).

Vers dorés likewise sings the praises of Sanskrit, invoking after Jones its 'richesse,' its 'fécondité,' its 'structure admirable.'⁵³ He contrasts it inevitably with secondary, derivative languages: 'Ce que les autres possèdent en détail, elle le possède en totalité.'⁵⁴ As a linguistic absolute, then, Sanskrit is the model to be followed henceforth in any attempts at linguistic reform: 'La langue française, comme la sanscrite, doit tendre à l'universalité.'⁵⁵ Such is the relativism to which French has declined barely ten years after the death of Rivarol!

Ballanche also, tireless on 'la profondeur du sanskrit,' outlines a project of intellectual reform in the 1818 essay, according to which education should begin with a study of the 'racines primitives et des manifestations morales et intellectuelles' found in the sacred language of India. 'Selon quelques archéologues'—he has in mind first and foremost Court de Gébelin, Jones, and Friedrich Schlegel—'les mots ont eu, dans les langues primitives, une énergie par eux-mêmes, et indépendamment du sens convenu. (...) Ce qui est incontestable, c'est que nos langues dérivées ont perdu un grand nombre des propriétés qui distinguent les langues primitives, et qui excitent un si profond étonnement dans l'étude des langues indiennes.'⁵⁶ In the same year Bonald's *Recherches philosophiques* calls to witness Schlegel's celebrated essay on the Indians to confirm the discovery of a perfect, primitive language, and explains the term 'sanskrit' by the etymology well known at the time: 'langue *formée* ou *parfaite*.'⁵⁷ The Sanskrit and Hebrew languages, he further explains, 'datent certainement du premier âge des sociétés, et sont de quelques milliers d'années plus voisines que les nôtres des inventeurs et de l'invention.'⁵⁸

But Sanskrit has no more zealous partisan nor Orientalism a more effective popularizer than the Baron d'Eckstein, or the 'baron sanscrit,' as Lamartine nicknames him.⁵⁹ As an habitué of

⁵³ *Les Vers dorés de Pythagore*, Paris 1813, p. 122.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵⁶ *Essai*, p. 228.

⁵⁷ *Oeuvres*, III, p. 47 note.

⁵⁸ *Recherches philosophiques* (1818) in *Oeuvres*, III, p. 85.

⁵⁹ On the relations between Lamartine and Eckstein, see N. Burtin, *Le Baron d'Eckstein*, Paris 1931, p. 184 and Schwab, *op. cit.*, p. 245 ff. See in

The Romantic Mythology of Language

the literary groups of the twenties and thirties, Eckstein brings Orientalism within the reach of poets and traditionalists. In support of the studies he is passionately fond of, he exerts a most powerful oral influence, of which the rather fanatical character, however, can be readily discerned in his writings. 'Il est impossible,' he declares before the Institut historique in 1835, 'de s'imaginer quelque chose au-dessus de la rare et prodigieuse énergie de cette langue, fille de la zone torride, qui a toute la chasteté de la langue grecque (...).'⁶⁰ But as soon as they begin to describe Sanskrit, even the professional scholars, especially those of the first half of the century, readily lose all sense of measure. Whether to humiliate Europe by invoking an even older culture, or to ennoble it by exalting what are thought to be its grandiose origins, it was not easy to resist the temptation to grant Sanskrit precisely those titles to perfection, energy, prodigious antiquity, to which up to this point only the primitive language of occultist tradition had laid claim. 'La langue de ces hymnes (védiques),' writes the historian Edgar Quinet, 'mêlée d'éclat et de douceur, comme le soleil sur la rosée, semble elle-même la langue emmiellée de l'Aurore.'⁶¹ What is to be expected then from mere amateurs and poets? It comes as no surprise that Soumet in his *Divine Epopée* should call Sanskrit, Zend, and Celtic 'ces trois premiers rameaux de l'arbre du langage'; that 'sanskrit' should appear from the pen of Nerval as a generic term for the privileged languages of the past; or that the Catholic Ozanam should perceive 'nulle part mieux qu'en sanscrit se former le lien logique du mot et de l'idée.'⁶² It is

particular the eulogistic letter to Virieu (25 XI 1838) in Lamartine's *Correspondance*, Paris 1875, V, no. DCLXXXVI. In a letter to Raigecourt, two days later, he speaks again of the 'baron sanscrit' and calls him 'un brame d'occident.'

⁶⁰ *Sur les rapports entre l'Inde et l'Europe*, read at a meeting of the Institut historique of 21st Feb. 1835, p. 19. Cf. 'énergique comme le latin, concis, concentré, à la fois pittoresque et métaphysique comme nulle autre langue du monde' (*ibid.*, p. 2).

⁶¹ *Génie des religions*, 1842, p. 159. The cases of Chézy and Lanjuinais are just as characteristic. The latter, who was the editor of Court de Gébelin's *Histoire naturelle de la parole* (1815) before becoming a professional Orientalist (articles in the *Journal de la Société asiatique*, translations, etc.), reproduces all these epithets in a *Premier mémoire sur la langue sanscrite* (*Oeuvres*, Paris 1832, IV, p. 20, 21, 61, 80, etc.), and at the same time considers sanskrit as 'la mère des langues européennes' (p. 248).

⁶² A.-F. Ozanam, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris 1862, III, p. 205.

understandable that in such a state of linguistic estrangement, an unmistakable indication of the spiritual estrangement of the times, Greek and Latin should lose their exemplary function, and that, as the language of grace, Hebrew should find itself gradually ousted by a 'primitive language,' which came very close, as is clear from these texts, to being identified as Sanskrit.

MYSTICAL ETYMOLOGY

The mystical view of language, which at times the Illuminists and their successors attempted to support with comparative philology, includes a solemn respect for etymologies. 'Rien n'est plus instructif,' writes Saint-Martin, 'comme de ramener ces hautes langues à leurs racines, et de s'occuper de ces profondes étymologies.'⁶³ By taking account of such etymological frenzy and its background of half scientific half fanciful speculation, it is easier to understand the astonishing conservatism displayed in the grammatical and orthographical practice of the literary innovators of the twenties. Indeed, Hugo, who invariably counsels respect for grammar, had aimed at correctness from the outset of his career, but—to quote a well known text—'non cette correction toute de surface (...), mais cette correction intime, profonde, raisonnée, qui s'est pénétrée du génie d'un idiome; qui en a sondé les racines, fouillé les étymologies.'⁶⁴

Hugo no doubt owes his linguistic notions to his friend Nodier, who in his turn derives from Saint-Martin's editor Bonneville his wholly 'Martinistic' theory of language.⁶⁵ From his researches into 'la valeur intime du verbe de l'homme' Nodier had drawn the conclusion, inevitable in his time, that 'c'est l'étymologie qui le définit'⁶⁶ and which gives life and substance to words. In the same spirit Joseph de Maistre, arguing like Cratylus for a natural, primitive bond between each thing and its name,

⁶³ *De l'Esprit des choses*, II, p. 238.

⁶⁴ To be borne in mind, however, are the severe judgments which Ch. Bruneau has passed on this *Préface* to *Cromwell*.

⁶⁵ Viatte, *op. cit.*, II, p. 152.

⁶⁶ *Notions élémentaires de linguistique*, Brussels 1834, p. 156. 'Mais il n'a jamais fait de distinction bien nette entre le coq-à-l'âne et l'étymologie' (Bruneau, *op. cit.*, p. 217).

The Romantic Mythology of Language

observed that 'ce mot seul d'*étymologie* est déjà une grande preuve du talent prodigieux de l'antiquité pour rencontrer ou adopter les mots les plus parfaits.'⁶⁷

The etymological approach is followed in almost all fields, many having learnt like Ballanche to discover 'dans la racine des mots l'expression permanente de la révélation et de la spontanéité.'⁶⁸ The initiates of philology, generally speaking, and thanks to etymology, have access henceforth to the primitive world, to the auroral world that preceded profane history. This mythological suggestion can be read between the lines of the literary manifestoes and projected language reforms. In 1834, in a revised, enlarged edition of Boiste's etymological dictionary, Nodier warns his contemporaries against all licences of syntax and spelling: 'Encore une modification dans l'orthographe et la langue françoise (*sic*) n'existe plus,⁶⁹ and this for a quite mystical reason: 'parce que le verbe n'y sera plus incarné.'⁷⁰ At about the same time Balzac exhibits in *Louis Lambert* his own curiosity concerning 'le verbe primitif des nations, verbe majestueux et solennel, dont la majesté, dont la solennité décroissent à mesure que vieillissent les sociétés.' It is clear that he is as fond as Louis Lambert of embarking 'sur un mot dans les abîmes du passé' in the hope of fathoming 'les mystères enfouis dans toute parole humaine.'⁷¹

Nevertheless, the intense grammatical activity contemporary with the triumph of romanticism is largely directed against the liberties taken by the young generation of poets. The *Journal grammatical*, for example, active between 1826 and 1829, is much concerned with this 'dangereux Romantisme' and its 'Néologie'—terms which are practically considered synonymous at the time and which the directors of the *Journal*, Marle and Boniface, write with capitals in order better to annihilate them. Armed with the *idéologie* of Destutt de Tracy and the notions of general grammar which it embraces, the rather aggressive *Journal* is intent upon crossing honorable swords with 'ces

⁶⁷ *Les Soirées*, I, p. 75.

⁶⁸ *La Vision d'Hébal*, p. 48.

⁶⁹ *Notions élémentaires*, p. 137.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

⁷¹ *Louis Lambert* (1832) in *Oeuvres complètes*, V, p. 5.

barbares échappés des rochers calédoniens, ou des forêts teuto- niques.’ In Hugo’s view, on the other hand, the oft repeated accusations of this kind were without justification. Thus, in *Littérature et philosophie mêlées* he explains the romantic renewal of the vocabulary as being essentially a return to the origins of the language, brought about ‘selon les lois grammaticales les plus rigoureuses’; while his contemporaries, far from fabricating words artificially, have merely restored to the language the savor proper to it, and reminted a few worn out words ‘au coin de leurs étymologies.’ In other words, ‘la langue a été retrempée à ses origines. Voilà tout.’⁷² Historians of the language have not hesitated to acknowledge the rightness of Hugo’s observations, while those writers customarily ranked among the creators of nineteenth century literary prose, above all Chateaubriand, Paul-Louis Courier, Joseph de Maistre, and Lamennais, are to be counted at the same time among the most devout worshippers of etymology.

THE MAGIC OF THE WORD

The romantic belief in the primacy of the word looks for support towards the Hebrew doctrine of the creative *logos*. But, by overlooking the distance that separates the word of God from human speech, the rights of the *logos* are claimed for the word to advance ambitions of a rather magical order. As re-interpreted by Court de Gébelin, the doctrine of the creative word recurs constantly in the pages of Saint-Martin: ‘Les choses n’existent que par la parole qui les conduit, et dont elles ne sont que l’organe et l’expression.’⁷³ It is by virtue of its analogy with the

⁷² *Littérature et philosophie mêlées*: ‘But de cette publication.’

⁷³ *De l’Esprit des choses*, II, p. 78. Saint-Martin’s remark is in a way based on observation; for he had indeed observed and commented upon the popular cult of certain words (*liberté*, *nation*, etc.) during the Revolution. See *Éclair sur l’association humaine*, 1797, p. 90. Within an impassioned crowd, as can be confirmed for any epoch, moreover, *nomina* are quickly transformed into *numina*. ‘Certains (mots), comme *patrie*, *liberté*, ont été déifiés, et, par une sorte de mythe, sont devenus des forces vivantes, dont l’action s’est faite sentir jusque dans les événements eux-mêmes’ (F. Brunot, *op. cit.*, Tome IX, p. X). Indeed, the Revolution, with its incursions of popular and superstitious attitudes, and its taste for oratorical hocus-pocus, lent a strange religiosity to the word and to speech, and consequently marks an important stage in the formation of the romantic mythology of language.

The Romantic Mythology of Language

divine word, he explains, that the act of the poet is sacred and literally creative.⁷⁴ Ballanche too, in the essay of 1818, recalls 'la croyance primitive dans la force des mots,' declares the act of naming to be 'une prise de possession de la création,' and interprets human discourse as 'une participation à la création.'⁷⁵ Nodier, among other effective mediators of the time, transmits these views to the poets of his generation. The romantics, however, have no need of learned or bookish sources to rediscover the magical properties of language; for their own outlook is clearly a return to an 'archaic' mentality, somewhat indifferent to sustained reasoning and so the more inclined to mythological creation.

There has been a gradual passage from a conception of words as 'la peinture d'objets déterminés'⁷⁶ to one that ascribes primary reality to them. Lamartine, longing for the primitive language 'où chaque verbe étant la chose avec l'image,'⁷⁷ finally perceives 'dans les mots de si brillants symboles / Que la nature vit et sent dans les paroles.'⁷⁸ The word is no longer a mere sign, an arbitrary form, but the declaration of a real presence, 'réalité ou substance,' says Nodier,⁷⁹ a bursting forth of being, a living entity. If the Symbolists could choose to yield to words, it is because the romantics, even the pre-romantics, had already experienced the irresistible initiative proper to them. Thus, Senancour observes how words 'entraînent nos volontés, comme notre pensée,' how they 'embrasent notre imagination, et quelquefois déterminent notre vie.'⁸⁰ Lamartine and Hugo are both rather

⁷⁴ Cf. *L'Homme de désir*, p. 43, *Des Erreurs*, p. 492.

⁷⁵ *Essai*, p. 233. With the renewal of the old myth, there is a return also to the old Hebraic, Johannine, and Illuminist association of word and light, a theme that no one has taken up more constantly perhaps than Lamennais in his *Esquisse d'une philosophie*. The association is commented upon at length by Eckstein in an article of *Le Catholique*, N. 37, 1829 (Vol. 13, p. 116-117). Cf. Hugo:

J'existais avant l'âme. Adam n'est pas mon père.
J'étais même avant toi; tu n'aurais pu, lumière,
Sortir sans moi du gouffre où tout rampe enchaîné;
Mon nom est FIAT LUX, et je suis ton aîné!

Les Contemplations: 'Suite.'

⁷⁶ *Le Monde primitif*, I, 6.

⁷⁷ *La Chute d'un ange*: 'Troisième vision' (*Oeuvres*, I, p. 88-89).

⁷⁸ *Op. cit.*: 'Dixième vision' (*Oeuvres*, I, p. 265).

⁷⁹ *Notions élémentaires*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ *Rêveries*, I, p. 227-228.

given to personifying the word or speech,⁸¹ while the latter states expressly that for him the word is 'un être vivant' of unlimited power: 'Cette toute-puissance immense sort des bouches.'⁸²

For Balzac likewise words possess not only 'un vivant pouvoir' but also creative properties, speech being in his view 'une communication qui brûle et dévore,' but which at the same time 'engendre incessamment la SUBSTANCE.'⁸³ In *Un Nom* Lamartine takes up the idea—not to say the perennial superstition—that to pronounce a name is to conjure up what it designates. Similar thoughts lurk even in the mind of a Victor Cousin, who is of the view that languages 'créent en quelque sorte un nouveau monde.'⁸⁴ But the examples are easy to multiply; for one very soon realizes that, in the manipulation of their words, romantic poets and thinkers alike aspire at least obscurely to the cosmogonic act.⁸⁵

AGAIN THE INDIAN PRECEDENT

Romantic writers, as tempted, disturbed, fascinated, and gratified by India as Schwab has described them, could hardly fail to appeal to the word-mysticism with which Sanskrit literature is pervaded from its earliest monuments. Thus, it is thanks to the power of his words that the Indian of Vedic times frees himself from the tyranny of the gods: 'On les adore, on les flatte, mais on sait qu'on a prise sur eux. Ce pouvoir, c'est la parole, la parole qualifiante ou louange, qui oblige le dieu dans la mesure même où elle le désigne.'⁸⁶ Echoes of this kind of belief are widely scattered throughout the Sanskrit texts known to European poets and in the commentaries on such texts in the

⁸¹ Such personifications and reifications are an essential aspect of the mythological process. See, among other passages of the same type, the 'Novissima Verba' of the *Harmonies* (*Oeuvres*, IV, p. 352).

⁸² *Les Contemplations*: 'Suite.' Cf. 'Oui, tout-puissant. Tel est le mot' and the celebrated 'Car le mot, c'est le Verbe, et le Verbe, c'est Dieu' (*ibid.*).

⁸³ *Louis Lambert*, p. 138.

⁸⁴ *Cours d'histoire de la philosophie*, XXII^e leçon.

⁸⁵ Cf. Lamennais: 'Toute parole n'est qu'un écoulement, une participation de la parole infinie, du Verbe divin' (*Esquisse d'une philosophie*, Paris 1840-1846, II, p. 222).

⁸⁶ Louis Renou, *L'Inde classique*, I, Paris 1947, p. 316.

Asiatic Researches, and in the works of Eckstein and the other mediators. For example, both Senancour and Fabre d'Olivet are well aware of the mystical character of the syllable OM, from having read of it no doubt in the *Asiatic Researches*. A review in *Le Globe* of 1825,⁸⁷ alludes moreover to the sacred character of language generally in Indian traditions. Indeed, the Indian doctrines of incantation, theories of the immutable word, identified with God, Indian parallels to the Greek *logos*, the efficacy of prayer, word-magic, these are so many commonplaces of *Le Catholique*, a review published by Eckstein from 1826 onwards and well known even outside traditionalist circles. Thus, 'la création,' he writes in 1827, 'est un système de révélation au moyen du verbe créateur (...). Elle est langue, syntaxe, système grammaticale: aussi Saraswati, personification de Vach (vox, la voix), parole créatrice, verbe révélé...'.⁸⁸ In short, India could offer, over and above its 'primitive' language, an abundant mysticism of the word capable of confirming every extravagance of the linguistic mythology of Europe.

It is no wonder then that Ballanche, in a passage where he recalls that 'la prérogative de nommer est (...), en quelque sorte, une participation à la création,' alludes to similar beliefs in India: 'Selon des sectes indiennes (...),' he says, '(la pensée humaine) a participé à la création.'⁸⁹ Indeed, a few examples will show that the influence of Indian word-mysticism is discernible in the greatest of the French romantic writers. Thus, in *Notre-Dame de Paris* Frollo quotes from the *Laws of Manu* a prescription concerning names of women which is in fact in the text.⁹⁰ Not long after Loiseau-Deslongchamps, Balzac's *Séraphita* refers to the magical properties of words which had led 'les théosophes indiens à expliquer la création par un verbe' and compares this theory with the *logos* of St John.⁹¹ An article on Indian epic published

⁸⁷ 24th Dec. (Tome III, p. 4). Cf. the gloss 'Oum: Deus' in Anquetil-Duperron's *Oupnek'hat* (I, p. 7).

⁸⁸ N. 16, April 1827 (Vol. VI, p. 140). Cf. No. 36, Dec. 1828: 'Dans le Kosmos (...) nous étudions le Logos'; 'Selon les livres indiens la nature c'est l'écriture par excellence'; 'la parole nous initie à l'abîme de la sagesse divine'; etc. (Vol. XII, p. 437-441).

⁸⁹ *Essai*, p. 233.

⁹⁰ See *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Paris 1931, II, p. 38 and *Le Livre de Manou*, Bk II, v. 33.

⁹¹ *Séraphita* (1834-1835) in *Oeuvres complètes*, XII, p. 48.

by Quinet in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of 1840 points out, among other Hindu themes, that of the 'incantation de l'univers par la prière du poète.' The apotheosis of the Word figures in *Panthéon* (1842), a theological poem by Hippolyte Fauche, who is a pupil of Burnouf and the future translator of the *Ramayana*. Finally, in the epigraph of his *Cours familier*, possibly a reminiscence of an article or a remark by Eckstein, Lamartine attributes to a vague 'poète et philosophe indien' the significant thought: 'Toutes choses sont en germe dans les paroles.'

THE UNIVERSAL HIEROGLYPH

The romantic myth of the creative *logos* was to enjoy a remarkable success among the Symbolists; for it implies, in addition to word-magic, a conception of the universe as being linguistic by its very nature. Nature is a language, a spoken word, an inscription, and in the limiting case a hieroglyph. 'Tout est langue,' says Saint-Martin, 'Tout est parole,'⁹² and this language of the universe is superior to all others, since in it 'le signe est toujours dans un rapport exact avec les propriétés invisibles qu'il doit manifester.'⁹³ Ballanche shows himself equally sensitive to 'la voix dans les choses.' For Lamennais, influenced here by Saint-Martin, nature is 'le tabernacle de la parole,' created beings are each a word of 'la langue infinie,' of 'la grande et majestueuse langue de la Nature.'⁹⁴ In natural objects Michelet too perceived 'les mots d'une langue,' Vigny, a reader of Ballanche, could make out 'un secret langage,' and Nerval 'des voix secrètes.'⁹⁵ This is clearly another commonplace of romanticism but one that has a very significant place in a total mythological structure.

⁹² *De l'Esprit des choses*, I, p. 256-257; *L'Homme de désir*, p. 220.

⁹³ *De l'Esprit des choses*, I, p. 256. Cf. Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues*, Ch. XIV.

⁹⁴ *Esquisse*, I, p. 294.

⁹⁵ *Aurélia* in *Oeuvres* (Pléiade), Paris 1952, p. 403; for he knew that 'à la matière même un verbe est attaché' (*Vers dorés*). In France the theme of a symbolic 'language of nature' finds a definitive formulation in the translation of Creuzer by Guigniaut: *Religions de l'antiquité*, Paris 1825. See, for example, I, p. 31-32.

The Romantic Mythology of Language

Lamartine has perhaps spoken oftener than anyone of the voices of nature, which in fact he regards above all as 'une œuvre parlante.'⁹⁶ In the *Chute d'un ange*, where Illuminist influence is quite apparent, all beings are 'animés par une âme parlante'⁹⁷ and the comparison of the universe to an immense prayer is one of his constant images. There is no need to insist at length on the gift of speech which Hugo confers so readily on a universe in which 'Tout parle, l'air qui passe et l'alcyon qui vogue, / Le brin d'herbe, la fleur, le germe, l'élément.'⁹⁸

However, according to the Illuminist tradition from which these poets draw, the language of nature is no longer intelligible to common mortals since the fall of man and of nature. Saint-Martin arraigns modern man who is now incapable of understanding the 'signes,' the 'emblèmes,' the 'langage allégorique'⁹⁹ which the universe displays, these emblems, Ballanche adds, 'dont l'homme cherche l'explication après l'avoir perdu.'¹⁰⁰ Lamartine recalls many an effort to relearn this language. He has 'devancé les temps,' 'remonté les âges'—the constant recourse to history is significant—but nature remains 'une livre fermé.'¹⁰¹ Only occasionally in solitude 'J'ai cru trouver un sens à cette langue obscure.'¹⁰²

The word 'hieroglyph,' which sums up this whole doctrine, occurs several times in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, with overtones more reminiscent of Bochard than of Champollion. Likewise Nodier in the *Notions élémentaires* and Ballanche in *Hébal* stress the hieroglyphic nature of the universe.¹⁰³ From *Les Rayons et les*

⁹⁶ *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses*: 'Pourquoi mon âme est-elle si triste?' (*Oeuvres*, II, p. 275).

⁹⁷ 'Première vision,' p. 23.

⁹⁸ *Les Contemplations*: 'Ce que dit la bouche d'ombre,' II, 12-13.

⁹⁹ *Tableau naturel de la parole*, 1782, p. 242.

¹⁰⁰ *Orphée* (*Oeuvres*, V, p. 168).

¹⁰¹ *Premières méditations*, p. 6.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Diderot had a special fondness for the term hieroglyph to designate the essential mystery of the best poetry: 'L'emblème délié, l'hieroglyphe subtil qui règne dans une description entière...' (*Lettre sur les sourds et muets* in *Oeuvres*, Paris 1875, I, p. 376). It was doubtless Saint-Martin, however, who passed on to the French romantics the image of a hieroglyphic universe. 'Dans l'ordre naturel et parfait,' he says, 'les signes hiéroglyphiques précèdent universellement les langues' (*Tableau naturel*, p. 255). For Ballanche, 'L'ordre matériel est (...) un hiéroglyphe du monde spirituel' (*Pal. soc.*, p. 212). Guigniaut

Ombres onwards the word acquires increasing frequency in poetry; Soumet gives to understand in a long passage of the *Divine Epopée* that nature is a hieroglyph.¹⁰⁴ Hugo returns to this theme in *Les Contemplations*: '...et j'apprenais à lire / Dans cet hiéroglyphe énorme, l'univers.'¹⁰⁵ Indeed, the testimonies unanimously agree that the poet alone has some chance of success.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

A more detailed study could establish more conclusively how empiricist reflection on the linguistic sign culminates in the Romantic mythology of language. It would then be clear that we are concerned above all with an internal evolution, shaped in its course by Illuminism, fostered by the traditionalists, and receiving support at decisive stages from comparative philology and early Indian studies. Moreover, the term 'mythology' appears justified by the collective, coercive, and exalting quality of the beliefs in question.

In the 'classical,' previously traditional view, language is an instrument of thought, and necessarily subsequent to thought in time: 'Ce que l'on conçoit bien s'énonce clairement.' It reproduces more or less faithfully the categories of logic, imitates the established order even in its hierarchization, without ever seeking to transgress its natural limits, and even thrives within its finite, closed nature. In opposition to this view romanticism sets up an autonomous, compulsive being, which is not a means but an end in itself and an eternal rebeginning. Older than the human mind, even contemporary with creation, language creates our concepts and reduces the universe to its measure.

in his turn contributes to the vogue of the hieroglyph with his translation of Creuzer (see *op. cit.*, I, 1 Ch. III), which Eckstein inevitably has in mind when he writes in *Le Catholique*: 'L'univers offre à l'homme comme un vaste hiéroglyphe' (No. 36, Dec. 1928, Vol. XII, p. 373). Cf. Nodier, *Notions élémentaires*, p. 90; Balzac, *Louis Lambert*, p. 5; Nerval, *Aurélia* (*Oeuvres*, p. 387).

¹⁰⁴ Soumet, *La Divine Epopée*, Paris 1840, I, p. 10-11.

¹⁰⁵ *Les Contemplations*: 'Écrit en 1846.'

¹⁰⁶ It is for this reason that the poet is a mage, a seer. Cf. Soumet, who identifies hieroglyph, language of nature, and primitive language (See his preface to the *Divine Epopée*).

At no point of romantic speculation is language seriously recommended as a precise instrument of thought. Over this essential aspect of its functioning there reigns instead a deep scepticism that has only increased from the nominalism of Locke to the devastating criticism of contemporary linguistic philosophy. The reaction of romanticism was to place language at the centre of its spiritual aspirations, to discover in it an opening on to the 'Grand Temps'—in Eliade's sense of the term—on to the perfections of a 'primitive world,' to interpret language as a theophany ('le mot, c'est Dieu,') and finally to believe in it as in a saviour who will abolish profane history and transform illusory appearances into a hieroglyph.