

January 15, 1989 (Vol. 4, no. 9)

Dear Colleague:

If the ideal of modernism is captured by the image of the Shining City, that of post-modernism may be said to be captured by the image of multitongued Babel. The eleventh chapter of the Book of Genesis offers us both, as Leon Kass points out in a recent provocative paper (American Scholar, Winter 1989). Genesis tells us the story of how people from all parts of the earth, all speaking the same tongue, have gathered in the land of Shinar in order to build a great city that will reach to the heavens. What a noble enterprise! And the people will probably succeed because they are united by common language and purpose. God, however, will not have it so. He confounds the language of the humans so that they may not understand one another's speech and cannot cooperate in their great project. According to Kass, God was not merely jealous; He was and is also wise where the ultimate welfare of humans is concerned. One language, if it can be achieved, is bad for humans because it will encourage the illusion that their language not only conforms to reality but calls it into being. All truths are humanly created, just as the city itself is an obvious human construction, and there will be no contrary voice to say, "Maybe you are in error." And so, the project for mastery and unity, undertaken to overcome a sense of estrangement from the world, will end, if the project is successful, in "the complete and permanent estrangement from what is real."

Babel has its distinct advantages. One culture and language's notion of truth will be controverted by another's notion; and in the periodic confrontations of different opinions and views, humans can slowly and modestly approach some distant horizon of Truth or, if you like, God. Kass fears modernity's Cartesian city, its universal language of mathematics, its swift unilinear ascent to power, its single domineering and totally human vision. He much prefers post-modernism's babel--its cultural pluralism and dissenting tongues. Unfortunately, he seems to have forgotten one fact, namely, with the death of God and the notion of transcendental truth and reality, the contending tongues have become ends in themselves, or are engaged in for the sake of winning temporary advantage for oneself or for one's group, rather than as a dialectical method for arriving at a complex vision of the real.

Best wishes,

