The Greater Harmonies

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In Italian writer Tomasso Landolfi’s book Gogol’s Wife, there is a fascinating story called “Dialogue on the Greater Harmonies.” The story concerns a man, Y, who takes Persian lessons from a charismatic English captain. An aspiring poet, Y thinks that having even a basic grasp of Persian will enable him to compose more compelling and beautiful poems in Persian than he would be able to write in his native language. When he tries to read a work by a famous Persian poet, however, he discovers that the language the captain has taught him is not actually Persian. Not only is it not Persian, though—it is not any known language. When Y writes to the captain demanding an explanation, the captain claims he does not recognize any of the symbols or sounds Y is using in his poems.

This past year, I, like Y, encountered a totally foreign language for the first time. In the fall, I took a beginning-level course in Arabic, which shares an alphabet with Persian. I was drawn to Arabic, I think, because of the fact that its symbols and sounds were, at first, incomprehensible to me. After spending five weeks learning the alphabet, however, and another five learning basic vocabulary and grammar, I became comfortable enough to start jotting down tiny Arabic poems in my notebooks. I immediately found myself sympathizing with Y’s wonderful claim in “Dialogue” that “having at his disposal rich and varied expressive means is, for an artist, anything but a favorable circumstance.” In writing three-line pieces composed almost entirely of noun-verb and noun-adjective sentences (if they were sentences at all), I discovered, with Y, that “anyone who
does not know the right words to indicate objects or feelings, is forced to replace them with circumlocutions, that is with images—with what great advantage to art, I leave you to imagine."

I rarely compose poetry in English because of exactly the same problems Y describes. Spending a lifetime speaking one language tends to wear out, in a way, the freshness and beauty that its words innately have as conglomerations of sound. When one does not have to use a language for essential communications during the day, it is easier to find in it more youth, play, and novelty. At first, when I spoke Arabic, I had to be slow and deliberate, “[shuffling] out three or four strange sounds,” like the captain in “Dialogue,” but by the end of the term I had internalized the basics of the language enough to attempt artistic expression. The first few times were accidental: when we learned a new word in class, I would write a meaningless sentence with it in a page of my notebook. The first such “poem” I wrote was this:

اذهب صبحاً
الي الشجرة الاسود

This tiny piece of verse, which five months ago would have meant absolutely nothing to me, translates loosely as: “I go by morning / to the black tree.” In both English and Arabic, it is an incredibly elementary piece of writing. A few weeks later, I already had a better grasp of Arabic grammar. The second poem I wrote ran thus:

في أي شريع
في هذه مدينة قديمة
كانت الأمراة
من طفولتي؟

Roughly translated, the poem reads: “On which street / In this old city / Was the woman / From my childhood?”

In “Dialogue,” Y and his friend, who is also the narrator, go to see an eminent literary critic in order to solve the conundrum of Y’s lost language. The rest of the text of “Dialogue,” not so much a narrative as a forum for philosophical inquiry, is devoted to the ensuing conversation between Y, his friend, and the critic. They quickly become embroiled in a debate over whether Y’s poems have any real meaning. Y and his friend are doubtful that Y’s “Persian” can ever be said to have any meaning, but the critic protests that even though only two people spoke the language, and then only for a few months, it nevertheless has a definite existence. He advises them to regard it as a “dead language,” and he objects to the idea that “the attributes of reality of any language cannot be identified outside of the grammar, the syntax, and...the lexicon.” Even “completely indecipherable” languages, says the critic, “have a right to our esthetic respect.”

If the critic in the story is right, what does that mean for the non-speaker of Arabic, who probably glossed right over the Arabic versions of the poems I transcribed above? What if I had not provided any translations? It is difficult for me to imagine being able to appreciate a poem, even my own, which I had no idea how to read. Unlike Y, I never had cause to doubt that the language I was being taught existed outside of my classroom. I suppose it is conceivable that the authors of my textbook and my professor could have been writing in “an idiom so crippled and defaced as to have nothing in common with the language that inspired it,” as was the captain in “Dialogue,” but this is unlikely. I have never been to an Arabic-speaking country, and I do not know any Arabic speakers outside of my class, but random encounters with Arabic in the world have validated the meaningfulness of the symbols I have learned in class. When I wrote the poems, I felt like I was communicating something with them, not because I thought anyone would ever read them, but because I knew that they could be read. Y, too, wrote poems under the (mistaken) notion that someone else in the world could find them meaningful. The sudden realization that he was the only one who spoke his “Persian” is what
caused him to approach his friend “gripped by great excitement” and “deepest dejection.”

The narrator in “Dialogue” responds to the critic’s contention that Y’s poems have meaning with a counterargument that seems to echo the later work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. The narrator argues that even dead languages, of which we have only one or two artifacts or inscriptions, were once part of a societal structure. These past languages, indecipherable now, were once embedded within a “complex of norms and conventions,” from which “they gain their very significance,” whereas the language Y learned was “a momentary whim...which has not been codified in any manner and which has vanished as irremediably as it arose.” The narrator insists that “ethnic knowledge” lends legitimacy to dead or indecipherable languages. “Behind an inscription,” he declares to the critic, “there is an entire people!” Wittgenstein says something similar in the *Philosophical Investigations*. “The common behavior of mankind,” he writes in section 206, “is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.”

We need a societal context, then, in order to determine the meanings of a language’s symbols. Artifacts from dead languages, such as scrolls and carvings, present evidence in favor of these meanings having existed, but Y’s language is different: he has no evidence of its meaningfulness except for the three poems he wrote on a whim, and which he is barely able to read anymore, having forgotten much of the language.

In a few other places in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes reference to something he calls “forms of life.” In section 241, he writes, “It is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.” A form of life, Wittgenstein seems to think, is some kind of context in which we place a language, or a system of behavior that gives rise to a language. Earlier, in section 19, he imagines “a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle...And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.” That is to say, any meaningful language must be embedded within a culture or a system of behavior.
Arabic has a centuries-old history and is deeply rooted in the cultures of the Middle East. From its standard greetings (سلام, which means “peace”) to its expressions of grief or piety (لا لله إلا الله, which means “there is no god but God”), Arabic expresses the character of entire cultures. But what are we to make of Y’s language, which, even if it was at one point the result of a “form of life,” now has no fluent speakers and only one remaining document that gives evidence of its existence? Y’s “Persian” might be a language per Wittgenstein because one can argue that the exchange between Y and the captain constitutes a “form of life,” but if that form of life no longer exists, we will have trouble arguing that the language is still meaningful. Regarding the meanings of this language’s symbols, we have only Y’s word to go on, and the translation he gives of one of his poems, he admits, “does not give the faintest notion of the original.” In fact, since Y has forgotten some of the language in which he wrote the poems, “he is, strictly speaking, in no position to know what he wanted to say.” Therefore even Y does not grasp the original meaning of the poems he wrote. Furthermore, even if he did, he could never disclose to anyone the poems’ essence without compromising their original meaning through translation. Do his poems, then, even have any meaning? If they did, how could we prove it?

In further search of meaning in language, the debate in “Dialogue” quickly turns away from sociology and archaeology and towards a more esoteric discussion of semantics and aesthetics. The sentiments expressed on both sides of the debate are highly reminiscent of the moods and ideas of the great fabulist Jorge Luis Borges, with whom Landolfi is often compared. The narrator points out, as I have just done, that since there is so little information about Y’s mysterious language, there is almost no way to determine anything about the language itself. Actual dead languages, of course, leave behind numerous documents and inscriptions, but all that is left of Y’s language are three poems. This means, says the narrator, that from the poems “it might be possible to construct or reconstruct not one but a hundred languages...each dissimilar from the others and from the first.”
But the critic does not see any issue with this. “What does it matter to you,” he asks, “that a poem might turn out to be written in more than one language at the same time?” A work of art, he reminds the narrator, is “free not only from linguistic conventions but from all conventions...it creates its own rules.”

“Therefore,” reasons Y, “a work of art can also not have a common meaning; it can be made up of musical impressions alone and suggest to a hundred million readers a hundred million different things.” This wonderful passage brings to mind Borges’s story “The Library of Babel” (published only three years before “Dialogue”), in which he imagines an endless library containing every possible combination of the twenty-two letters in the Spanish alphabet (plus the period, comma, and space), meaningful or meaningless. If one travels for long enough, one will eventually find every conceivable book written in every conceivable language. It follows from this that even the books that contain complete nonsense must mean something in some one of the infinitely many languages, for which the library must eventually contain manuals for reading. “An n number of possible languages,” says Borges, “use the same vocabulary; in some of them, the symbol library allows the correct definition...but [in some languages] library is bread or pyramid or anything else...You who read me, are You sure of understanding my language?”

Borges thus points to a startling realization: if the words we use can be interpreted an infinitude of ways (even, perhaps, as sentences in other languages which we do not know), then we can never be totally sure of the meanings of the things we say. An English speaker, for example, who walks along singing “la, la, la,” would sound to an Arabic speaker as if he were saying “no, no, no,” since the Arabic word for “no” is pronounced “la.” When one considers language acquisition in this light, learning Arabic—or Persian—suddenly becomes nothing less than profound. Practicing a new language is often thought of as a mechanical task, something one does by rote memorization and daily drilling. But to learn a new tongue, Borges would say, is actually to put tremendous trust in symbols whose
meanings we can never be certain to know. It is to take something meaningless and imbue it with meaning for ourselves. With each new word we add to our vocabulary, we loosen and stretch the conceptual links we have with objects in the world. When I first learned the Arabic word “كرسي,” I associated it with its English translation, “chair,” and then with the idea of a chair. In time, however, the thing-for-sitting I saw in the world became both chair and كرسي.

No word can be perfectly translated from one language to another. The history and essence of the word “كرسي,” though similar to the history of the word “chair,” could never be exactly the same. And even if it were, the mere aesthetic differences between the two words are enough to inspire appreciation, if not awe, for the way language works: one thing in the world inspired two words radically different in both visual appearance and phonetic rhythm. By doing Arabic vocabulary drills, I am connecting the idea of a thing-for-sitting with a symbol which was formerly meaningless. I am solidifying the bridge between a word and a meaning on the tenuous assumption that the world will agree with me tomorrow that “كرسي” means what it does. The world may corroborate me time and time again, but at the end of the day, thinkers like Borges and Wittgenstein and Landolfi, writing in the very languages they question, can make me doubt the stability of the language I use to delineate my place among others.

I reproduced my poems above in order to demonstrate that they lack definite meaning in at least two ways: as meaningful symbols, but also as works of art. Regarding the first, both Borges and Landolfi would agree that there is absolutely nothing that proves to a non-reader of Arabic that my poems are composed of actually meaningful symbols, other than my claim that they are. Unless she bothered to have the foregoing sentences translated, someone with no experience in Arabic would have no way of determining if they were not gibberish, or even that they were actually Arabic at all. But, more interestingly, there is very little within these poems that identifies them as poems, to speakers and non-speakers of Arabic alike. A speaker of Arabic would find them empty of particularly powerful images, without any kind of rhyme or meter. Were it not for the
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The greater harmonies of their imagery, they might be indistinguishable even to a speaker of Arabic from the practice sentences in my textbook. They are poems primarily because I wrote them intending for them to be read as poems. A non-speaker of Arabic, though, would be even less able—that is to say, totally unable—to distinguish my first poem, which was meant as an artistic composition, from a garbage sentence such as “اذهب الى السينما / مع صديقي,” which means, “I go to the movies / with my friend.”

This problem, while it may seem minor at first glance, becomes a matter of utmost importance to Landolfi. As “Dialogue” reaches its final pages, the conversation between the narrator, Y, and the critic drifts toward the subject of art itself. Though the conversation between the three men has thus far concerned itself chiefly with the meaning of the symbols Y used in his poems, it suddenly arises that the secret to puzzling out the poems’ meanings is in their nature as works of art. To the critic’s contention that a poem can be written in a million different languages and mean a million different things (the same contention Borges grapples with in “The Library of Babel”), Y
desperately asks if this means that a poet can “start with the sound instead of the sense” in composing works of art. The critic replies in the affirmative. “A poem, gentlemen, can also not have meaning. It must only, I repeat, be a work of art.”

Temptingly, inevitably, this leads the reader to the critical question: but what is art? The critic contends that even gibberish poems, as long as they are works of art, still have legitimacy or “meaning” in a broader way—they can still be approached, interpreted, and made sense of. If he is right about this, it follows that a text composed of complete gibberish might not actually be meaningless if we think of it as a work of art. A nonsense text’s status as a work of art can give it a certain kind of meaning even though its component parts are empty of semiotic significance. This hints at a broader definition of “meaning” than the ones we have discussed so far: a meaning, that is, that can dwell even in meaninglessness. But if we do not know what is art and what is not, then we cannot be sure which gibberishes have this broader “meaning” and which do not. This generates uncertainties about where we can find meaning in language in an even more extensive way than our doubts about the validity of individual signs and symbols.

Landolfi teases us for two pages, baiting us along as he darts around the essential question of art. Then, at the end of the conversation, the narrator tries to refute the critic last more time.

I was not at all satisfied and before leaving I tried again:

“But art...”

“Art,” the great critic broke in, with amiable impatience,
“what art is everyone knows.”

If this wonderful story has a greatest moment, where Landolfi’s genius reaches a zenith, it is this line. The weight of this question, the question of art, is the center of gravity of the entire story, and Landolfi leaves it wildly unresolved. The last thing we hear of Y is that he has gone mad, tormented by the ineffability of the three poems he has written in the language that no longer exists.
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The conversation between the three men starts with a mystery and ends with an even greater mystery. It mimics the trajectory of all philosophical inquiry, be it linguistic or aesthetic: in attempting to solve a problem, we pull out from underneath ourselves the underpinnings of all we take for granted, but when we finish we find ourselves no closer to an answer (yet still somehow further along). The denouement of “Dialogue” is entirely unsettling, but it takes something truly unsettling to make us change the way we view the world. After reading Landolfi’s story, when I learn a new word in Arabic, or, as Arabic would have it, a كلمة جديدة, I think of Y and wonder what it really is that I am writing. When a non-speaker of Arabic looks upon a poem I have written in Arabic:

I cannot help but wonder if what they are seeing is actually a poem at all—for them, for me, or for anyone.