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Sticking Points

Review of Sarah M. Pourciau, *The Writing of Spirit: Soul, System, and the Roots of Language Science* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), pp. 373 Price \$25.00 ISBN-13 9780823275632

Something combines the squiggles you currently see, the sounds you hear as you read them, and the meanings that bubble up for your comprehension. This is the foundation of language, and linguistics as the science of language. But ask what of language is being connected, and we push hard against commonplaces in philosophy, sociology, anthropology, art and history-writing, just to name a few. Go deeper still, ask what is doing the combining, and we fumble towards an understanding of our culture and other societies, or perhaps towards nature, or something inarticulable at the heart of language. Amidst this darkness, we find the ideas which drive linguistics itself. Pourciau's *The Writing of Spirit* is not a history of linguistics as such, but rather a history of the idea, or perhaps an intuition, that the ways we express ourselves reflect some hidden order.

A hard enough task, but a task made harder by starting with early nineteenth-century Romantic philosopher Friedrich Schelling's *Weltseele*. The world-soul demanded that science capture not only its objects of knowledge, but also their surroundings, how our dappled reality emerges from a cosmic whole. By understanding the origins and inner drive of the world as it unfurls throughout history, we may be able to gain some hint to its – and our – ultimate purpose: in my beginning is my end. The *Weltseele* gave impetus to many studies of language, most famously to Jakob Grimm's 'sound laws,' the historic shifting of consonants in manuscripts: at once a call for a pure Germanic tongue, a testament to the inner balance of language, and a search for the origins of Reason itself. Words connect *Logos* and *Psyche*.

Less familiar to English-speaking audiences is just how far language-as-spirit permeated nineteenth-century thought. Pourciau gives two examples. The first surrounds Sanskrit hymns, Latin verses, and in particular, the German word *Stab*. The term can mean *letter* or *stick*, and as a poetic device indicates alliteration and emphasis. Yet, for nineteenth-century etymologists, it meant much more.

An origin scene of Germanic tribes, witnessed by Tacitus, removing twigs from trees and carving runes on them. Then cast into the air for the priest to read aloud the message which Odin had impelled within. From this scene – Language, Nature and Divinity tied into One – came the origins of the German alphabet and the fundamental shape of German verse, emphasis and meaning spread throughout. Pourciau's second example of spirit-language is even more grandiose. In a series of essays published between 1849 and 1852, Richard Wagner transformed theories of a primal German poetry into operatic art. Music and poetry following their separate laws and paths of organic development, he believed, but when coming together as equals giving emotional intensity and a sense of living movement. Vowels held this key. Carrier of sound and time, vowels for Wagner were at once music, breath, and life. Audiences were to identify with the eternal cycles of the cosmos, and find in his *The Ring of Nibelung* their oldest origin story, a goal for humanity. These examples achieve an argumentative force by translating the heady pronouncements of idealist philosophy into more concrete, indeed picturesque, forms. They animate Pourciau's discussions, drawing connections between the arts, humanities and sciences that few scholars have attempted before. They are a rich reward for the author's attention to detail.

Naturally, others did not wish to return to the forests from which we came. These include mechanist-materialist August Schleicher and Neogrammarians Karl Brugman and Hermann Osthoff. But chief opponents of the *Sprachgeist* for Pourciau are late nineteenth-century Swiss semiotician Ferdinand de Saussure and early twentieth-century Russian-American literary theorist Roman Jakobson. Pourciau makes good use of the manuscripts discovered in 1996 to explain Saussure's turn away from the bright light of the Infinite. When faced with the written and spoken word in all their variety, Saussure reasoned, either we the recipients have endless stores of knowledge for comprehension, or that sense is limited by what we cannot communicate. The radical conclusion is that meaning itself is meaningless, given by the boundaries of what we see, hear or think rather than by any inner import. No private idioms, no original *Logos*, no life within words. The study of language must study *only* language. Relatedly, with his anagram studies Saussure tried to analyse the German

alphabet at a stage prior to meaning. The attempt failed, but it inspired Jakobson's phonological method, dividing spoken words into 'minimal pairs' identifying phonemes, then breaking even these down again into qualities of diction. All, that is, except the Icelandic *h* and the French silent *e*. These, with no discernible quality, the 'zero phoneme,' illustrated for language both its foundational emptiness and the conditions of its possibility. Teleology and spirit once more, but contained entirely within language itself.

The historical crux of *The Writing of Spirit* is that the devil is in the detail. Indeed, the devil is in this review as well: I have discussed its contents chronologically rather than thematically, as Pourciau does in the text. Balancing chronological and thematic analysis is always difficult; the risk is that one stands in the way of the other. Sometimes the effects are minor. One example is Saussure's wave metaphor, with which Pourciau illustrates his notion of signification (pp. 80-82), but which is later revealed to be a central image for Germanic philosophical thinking through Leibniz, Kant, Wagner, Helmholtz and Wundt (pp. 166-169). Sometimes the effects are more dramatic. Pourciau's is an avowedly internalist history, showing that twentieth-century language scientists have never completely eradicated the spirit that animated their nineteenth-century predecessors. So there is some justification for dividing the book into a history of general linguistics, then a history of poetic analysis, and then a history of phonology. These allow for discussions of very fine theoretical detail. But technicalities alone leave major questions and themes unexplored, and, in fact, invite in another type of spirit we should cast out: that Science, like romantic conceptions of Language, unfurls through history according a logic of its own. Both Swiss Saussure and Jewish Jakobson had reasons for resisting the German *Geist*. Yet, aside from the mention of Jakobson's first flight to Copenhagen in 1939, no more is made of this devilish detail.

A related point is the relationship between language science and the other sciences. Pourciau rightly poses this as the central – indeed, perennial – dilemma for linguistics: what elements of language can be studied scientifically. The issue entirely depends on what counts as science. Pourciau explains

to great effect the high conceptual and methodological position of comparative anatomy in *romantishes Naturphilosophie*, and Wundt's psycho-physical parallelism is a useful foil to Jakobson's phonology. But more could be made of Schleicher's Darwinist propensities (pp. 60-61); of common themes in Saussure's radical methodology, Edmund Husserl's phenomenology and Émile Durkheim's sociology, mentioned in a single sentence (p. 70); as well as the anxious affinity that Neogrammarians felt with late nineteenth-century mathematicians on how to study continua, referred to here in a footnote (p. 283). How far linguistics could emulate these other sciences – through methods, practices, explanatory tropes and metaphysical backgrounds – or else rail against them, helps legitimise the science of language.

So there are two spirits here. One, metaphysical, which may imbue a language; the other, which animates scientists to engage with language. The distinction bears upon Pourciau's final thoughts, where structuralist linguistics is placed between empiricist philosophers such as David Lewis and 'neorationalists' such as Noam Chomsky: between language as arbitrary convention, and as neural or genetic substrate. Here, Pourciau offers language-as-interface, an ongoing event, created when mind and world come together yet subject to its own laws. Nineteenth-century spirit embodied in twentieth-century letters. But this is not borne out by Pourciau's thematic analyses, which end with semantics, etymology, grammatology and phonology each on their own separate paths. Not a language science but many sciences of language. Nor is the view supported by the fragments into which linguistics has since broken, as language scientists have pursued their own goals with their own mirror-images of natural-scientific methods. This reflects the professional spirit as much as the metaphysical. We have lost the mystical philosophy that held nineteenth-century language science together, and for good reasons that include – but are in no ways limited to – language. But without a replacement that permeates all levels of analysis, or at least a framework that hangs all the pieces together, or even a common course, then all we are left with are squiggles and sounds.

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