Tower of Babel

By BOB LANE

People who build monuments to themselves soon are unable to communicate with other people. They end up, with a half-finished monument, muttering a different language from everyone else.

This idea emerged from a discussion of the Tower of Babel story with a group of people in the Senior Citizens College in Parksville. In discussing the story, we considered several interpretations. It's a story about how the various natural languages come to be — a kind of pseudo-scientific origin myth. It's also a story about the self-centred disobedience of an edict from God. (Read “reason”, “intuition”, “inner light”, or the word of your choice).

Like most Biblical stories it is very short, symbolic, and takes some thinking to get at the meaning of the story. It is related in a simple narrative form and the images are particular and specific. We see the unified action of a tribe become self-destructive as the act of building the tower to Heaven becomes more and more an obsession, a goal to be achieved which will glorify the pride of the people involved.

Finally God (read “reason”, “intuition”, “inner light”, or the word of your choice) gets angry with the silliness of the project and in order to stop the project must have been like city council or a college meeting: everyone speaking a different language! No one could understand anyone else, or at least, one imagines, small groups could communicate (read “scheme”, “plot”, or the word of your choice) with each other but inter-group communication (read “scheme”, “plot”, or the word of your choice) would have been impossible.

After a while, one imagines, all those involved in building the tower would have become totally frustrated. Some would try longer than others to be heard through the din, but finally everyone would have to turn away from the tower and turn his or her attention to something else.

Building monuments to oneself is destructive. I believe that is what the Tower of Babel story is about. Of course we call all rest assured, for that all happened a very long time ago in a land far, far away.

And besides those Bible stories are either literally true or else just legends. They couldn’t be true in any important way.
No one would have trouble spotting the fallacy in this argument: The death rate in the navy during the Spanish-American War was nine out of 1,000. For civilians in New York during the same period it was 16 out of 1,000. Therefore, it was safer to be in the wartime navy than to be a civilian in New York.

But using data is not always easy, and often we misuse them in clever and delusory ways. "Science is rooted in creative interpretation. Numbers suggest, constrain, and refute; they do not by themselves, specify the content of scientific theories. Theories are built upon the interpretation of numbers, and interpreters are often trapped by their own rhetoric. They believe in their own objectivity, and fail to discern the prejudice that leads them to one interpretation among many consistent with their numbers."

This reminder comes from The Mismeasure of Man by Stephen Jay Gould, a book that is first on the list of "must-read" books for anyone interested in science, culture, intelligence or clever detective work. Gould has looked critically at the various attempts in the past century which tried to prove that white, male, northern Europeans were biologically superior to other races.

He is able, for example, to redo Samuel George Morton's experiments in which Morton measured skull size by pouring shot into skulls and then weighing the shot to fill a skull brim full. Morton was trying to get a correlation between size of cranium and intelligence. His data show that white, male, northern Europeans have larger skulls. Or at least they did show that until Gould did the experiments over discovering that, "Morton's summaries are a patchwork of fudging and fingering in the clear interest of controlling a priori convictions."

Morton, unlike someone like Cyril Burt, was not consciously fiddling the data. He was very "objective" in his attempts to get good data. But as Gould says: "All I can discern is an a priori conviction about racial ranking so powerful that it directed his tabulations along pre-established lines. Yet Morton was widely hailed as the objectivist of his age, the man who would rescue American science from the mire of unsupported speculation."

Morton's story is fascinating because it shows how insidious a proved idea can be in pushing even the most careful scientist to certain conclusions. The myth of objectivity as pushed by those in the statistics business is just that — a myth.

No one would go out to interview the average Canadian because, of course, we realize that he/she is not a real, breathing human being, but just a logical construct.

Similarly, we do not ask the coroner to remove the ego or id from a decayer. But as Gould's book shows we have been guilty of reification (giving a logical construct life) in the area of human intelligence. We have measured, calculated, ranked and categorized based on test results and averages thought to measure an imaginary entity called general intelligence.

And what is worse, we have done so in an attempt to justify already existing cultural prejudices.

The belief that art is good for us, that by "exposing" ourselves to the arts we can become better people, has been around so long that we probably do not even question it any more. Entire institutions are built on this belief. Large academic departments rest comfortably on the belief that great art produces great people.

I confess to holding the belief at times myself — have probably even suggested its truth in this column in a public assertion or two.

A good tonic to long-held beliefs is to have them challenged in a clever and interesting way. Such a challenge is to be found in Peter Thorpe's book Why Literature is Bad for You, published in 1980. A very readable book, it will challenge you if you too have come to believe that good books make good people, or it will seem to offer support if you want to abolish the teaching of literature (and other frills) from the educational system.

Chapter titles like: How Literature Separates Us From Our Feelings, How Reading Makes Us Lazy, Does Literature Cause Insanity? will give you some idea of the ground covered in this short book. Thorpe is not some badly educated red neck who hates anything that he can't drink, drive or destroy. He has been a professor of English at three universities, one state college and one junior college in the US. In the preface to his urbane and readable book he says, "for years I believed that if a person lived with great books he would be a better specimen of humanity — more mature, aware, happy, tolerant, kind and honest."

After years of teaching based upon that premise he has concluded something rather different. He writes: "My conclusions are these: that literary art, instead of making us more mature, has a subtle way of guiding us into a new immaturity. That the great books instead of endowing us with more awareness of the cosmos and the human condition, put the blinders on. That instead of showing us the way to happiness, literature moves us toward gloom. That it fogs our minds, instead of enabling us to think more clearly. And finally, that instead of improving our ability to communicate, it keeps us from getting through to each other."

In offering evidence for these challenging conclusions Prof. Thorpe draws on his knowledge of the western literary tradition as well as his knowledge of English professors gained from innumerable English department meetings. Reminding us that art is by nature about change, about conflict, and not about stability, he goes on to suggest that literature is to blame for the breakdown of the family and for the high rate of divorce in western society.

Suggesting that from the Iliad on one of the most common themes of literature is "Don't Co-operate!" he tells of his colleague who went around looking for something to refuse to co-operate with.

Literature is bad for us, Thorpe argues, because it is an imitation of life, a beautiful mirage. He writes: "In technology and "hard" science, the subject matter is distinct from our lives; in social science it is our lives, but in the arts it is an imitation of our lives. If we become too involved in the beautiful imitation, we can begin to lose touch with the real thing."

Actually, I think all teachers of literature (at all levels) should read Thorpe's book, as well as non-professionals with an interest in the relationship between art and life.

I'll leave you with a final quote: "Intentional in the comic, unintentional in the serious, incompetence is everywhere in literature. There really is something brain-softening about art. If it makes us tolerant, it makes us tolerant of the wrong things. Incompetence is one of these."