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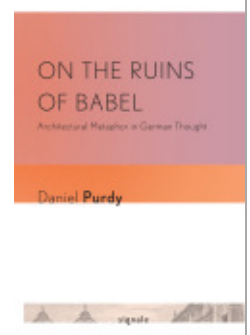
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On the Ruins of Babel

Architectural Metaphor in German Thought

Daniel L. Purdy

A Signale Book

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For Bettina

The story of Babel is usually told backwards—the many languages spoken around the tower were not a punishment, they were a delight. Any construction site in the world is filled with men who speak differently from one another, yet they always manage to understand each other after a few days together. If a great king calls a large workforce together, it will surely include men from different corners of his kingdom. Upon first hearing them speak, an outsider might imagine that they had no means of understanding one another, but this is clearly the opinion of someone immersed in just one language, someone like a priest, who spends all his days reading the scriptures of his one holy language. In the practical world of moving heavy stones and raising broad foundations, all languages are understood by everyone. In a flash the man lifting a wide, awkward bundle into a cart understands what the driver is telling him. The crane operator knows what the laborers below him need lifted. He hears them speaking and without worry picks up the right object. The words rise up to him like a song he understands but cannot write down. Only the priest who comes to visit the site, to judge the tower and the king who commands its construction, is confused. Only he hears chaos. And so when the king dies, and the work is left undone, the priest tells the story from the outside as if the many languages flowing into one another were a mark of sin, rather than a wonder.