The Walker and the Wake: Analysis of Non-Intrinsic Philological Isolates

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This paper has two points of departure. The first is the use of marginal phenomena to elucidate complex core conceptual questions, an approach that has been used to good effect in a wide variety of disciplines.¹ One such question is “What is language?,” where one not uncontroversial research program looks at animal behavior that arguably resembles human communication (e.g., bee dances, whale songs).² Another question — which we insist on distinguishing sharply from the

former — is “What is a language?” By this we refer both to the
determination of the place at which one language stops and an-
other begins (e.g., Danish/Norwegian, Kazakh/Kyrgyz) and to
the potential distinction between a language and a dialect (e.g.,
Hochdeutsch/Bairisch, Modern Standard Arabic/Maghrebi).³
We confine ourselves to this latter question.

The second point of departure, more common in anthropol-
ogy and history of science, is the categorization of intellectual
concepts or disciplines into collections of practices. To take an
example from the history of physics, certain theories (e.g., clas-
sical electromagnetism, quantum field theory) are only clearly
definable in retrospect; in the process of research, what physi-
cists actually do is solve problems using specific, often hetero-
genous, sets of calculating practices (e.g., partial differential
equations, Feynman diagrams) that frequently transcend highly
policed intradisciplinary borders. Different physicists retro-
spectively group together particular calculating practices and
call the resulting conglomeration “thermodynamics” or “string
theory.”⁴ Our proposal is that “philology” — and therefore also
pataphilology — is amenable to the same sort of analysis: it can
be treated as a set of practices (e.g., collation of manuscripts,
hermeneutics) that individual scholars, and communities of
scholars, aggregate in various combinations and deploy with
different emphases.⁵

*Tongue: The Long Debate about Animal Language* (Chicago: University of

³ For a good general discussion of what is involved in discriminating among

⁴ Andrew Warwick, *Masters of Theory: Cambridge and the Rise of Mathe-
matical Physics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); David Kaiser,
*Drawing Theories Apart: The Dispersion of Feynman Diagrams in Postwar

⁵ For a large-scale history of philology, see James Turner, *Philology: The For-
gotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University
Press, 2014). See also the essays in Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin Elman, and
Ku-ming Kevin Chang, eds., *World Philology* (Cambridge: Harvard Univer-
sity Press, 2014).
These combinations and emphases may at times seem peculiar. The question is, to whom? Our point is quite general. In any domain of knowledge (science, medicine, the humanities), the boundary between the legitimate and the anathema is contentious, in terms of both where it should be drawn and whether the drawing of such a line is even permissible. The allegation that something is pseudoscientific is notoriously problematic, for a variety of reasons. First, people never attribute quackery to themselves; the term thus cannot be separated from polemic. Second, since the definition of controversy is that specialists in a discipline do not yet know what the right answer is, disciplines cannot definitively label a position valid or erroneous (e.g., string theory or the innateness hypothesis, today). And third, theories that were once mainstream (e.g., astrology) become demonized, while ones that were demonized (e.g., atomism) become conventional wisdom. The point has been most extensively explored in the natural sciences but is equally applicable to other areas of Wissenschaft, such as philology.

There are more and less helpful ways of making the extension. One strand of scholarship, drawing extensively on the sociology of deviance, explores the less respectable neighborhoods of language use (thieves’ cant, Rotwelsch, Pig Latin) as


modes of protest against established norms, defined negatively by the absence of some specific properties of the unmarked linguistic variant: in short, as “anti-language.” Our difficulty with this framework, which has had the salutary effect of increasing empirical awareness of such widespread phenomena as well as some of their general characteristics, is that it starts from an assumed definition of “language” and then searches for its by-blows. More promising, in our view, is the aforementioned emphasis on practices of language use. A forger, just like a philologist, collates texts and studies, say, the forms of majuscules. Much can be gained by bracketing the intellectual or monetary value of the forgers’ fruits and focusing instead on which practices they learn from the philologists — and, conversely, what the philologists learn from the forgers. At the level of practices, there is no need to introduce a notion of deviance. Pataphilology is philology, full stop.

The canonical domain of philology — that is, where philological practices are deployed — is literature. Our entry point is fiction written in what one might call non-intrinsic philological isolates, by which we mean unique forms of language (hence, isolates) that could be used outside the confines (hence, non-intrinsic) of the literary works (hence, philological) in which they made their debut — though generally they aren’t. A marginal perspective, no doubt, but sometimes the fringe reveals the core.

We might classify such literary works along two principal axes: degree of playfulness and attention to rules. Although some elements of wordplay are present in all literature, not to say all language, some literary works strongly emphasize these aspects while others do not. Likewise, language itself is highly rule-governed—as is all literature—yet literary texts differ broadly in the degree to which they, explicitly or implicitly, call attention to the character and pervasiveness of the rules themselves. It is not difficult to find works that illustrate essentially any location along these dimensions. For example, members of Oulipo produce literature that is both extraordinarily ludic and extraordinarily rule-bound, often for the purpose of showing that it is possible to do so (e.g., writing a novel in French without the letter e), though in the best cases the emphasis on form enhances the content rather than overshadows it. By contrast, we concentrate on fictional works that highlight the specifically ruled aspects of their construction and therefore set Oulipian writings aside.

The works we will consider are all written in English—or “English,” if you prefer, though we aim to convince that the quotation marks make no real difference. For reasons we will address, most are British, postwar, written in the first person, male, and post-apocalyptic. Among other novels, we discuss Anthony Burgess’s *A Clockwork Orange*, Russell Hoban’s *Riddley Walker*, Paul Kingsnorth’s *The Wake*, and James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*. We begin with Irvine Welsh’s English Scottish *Trainspotting*, which—despite appearances—presents the fewest difficulties: “The sweat wis lashing oafay Sick Boy; he wis trembling. Ah wis

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13 Examples could readily be adduced for other languages. Vladimir Sorokin’s *Den’ oprichnika* (2006), translated by Jamey Gambrell as *Day of the Oprichnik* (2011), provides a straightforward analogue in Russian, with debts to some of the other novels discussed in this essay.
jist sitting thair, focusing oan the telly, tryin no tae notice the cunt.”

Mark Renton speaks, and the novel begins. Renton is the main character, and often the principal narrator, of *Trainspotting*, the celebrated and controversial 1993 novel by Irvine Welsh (b. 1957). The disputes are multi-layered, and a proper cultural or linguistic analysis (neither of which we will do) would yield substantial insights. Two points about the controversy are worth noting for our account. For one thing, the protagonists are heroin addicts and small-time crooks in the slums of Edinburgh who engage in bar fights, rape, infanticide through neglect, and other activities that are not cricket. For another, the reader is immediately struck by the language. If you are reading this essay with comparative ease, then you probably find the above quotation hard to parse, as you would most of the novel until page 32. There you find, at the start of a new section, this: “Despite the unmis-takable resentment she could feel from her mother, Nina could not fathom what she had done wrong.” The language is achingly familiar.

Welsh’s episodic novel consists mostly of stretches of dialogue or internal monologue in the argot of the underclass, studded with clauses reminiscent of the Nina passage (the first of these comes already in the second paragraph). For those who lack exposure to the nightlife of present-day Edinburgh, Renton’s locutions are understandably difficult. His protagonists belong to the sort of population for which the notion of “anti-language” was developed as a sociological categorization of the dialect of an underprivileged group: in this case, a spectrum of

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language use that ranges from Standard Scottish English all the way to broad Scots.

Scots is a well-known Germanic language that is widely considered a dialect of the well-known Germanic language English and, like most linguistic forms, exhibits a rich heterogeneity across distances both geographic and socioeconomic. Renton’s speech may become easier for you if you take it off the page: in the formulation of John Mullan, “As with [Robert] Burns’s poetry, if it looks obscure all you have to do is speak the words aloud.”

The trick works for two reasons. First, as literate people in a society with strict orthographic norms, we find spelling that is aberrant abhorrent, but the very deviations serve admirably to represent “non-standard” dialects in print. And second, variance in speech is expected, and you may well have heard Scots (and Scottish) in your day-to-day life — on the tube, on the telly — for reasons that have nothing to do with Irvine Welsh.

Even if you haven’t, once you’ve read a few pages, you notice that the language is for the most part predictable in its diction, rhythms, syntax, and for that matter spelling: it is regular the way our languages are. In the terms we set out in the introduction, *Trainspotting* is low on wordplay but high on regularity. For all that, it falls outside our main purview, for the important reason that its regularity is not what we have called “isolated.” Welsh’s Scots is regular because Edinburgh’s Scots is regular: the regularity was in the world and was then imported into the book. (Pata)philology becomes more interesting when we move from book to world.

It goes almost without saying that the language in which a book is written plays a large role in defining its internal world,

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17 Conversely, the less exposure an audience has to the idiom, the less this works. The first twenty minutes of the 1996 movie adaptation of the novel were redubbed for American audiences with slightly toned-down Scots (see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0117951/trivia?ref_=tt_trv_trv). Once they had become accustomed to the rhythm of the dialogue, the average American was presumably able to enjoy the same movie as British viewers.
and it follows from this that the more non-standard the language of a novel is, the more alien its world appears. Consider *A Clockwork Orange*, which Anthony Burgess (1917–1993) published in 1962 and which rocketed to tremendous popularity after the sensational release of Stanley Kubrick’s 1971 film. The book’s—and to a lesser extent the movie’s—evocative dystopia relies heavily on the character of the first-person narration, which never lapses from the protagonist Alex’s idiolect. Once again, the quality of the argot, which Burgess later named Nadsat, is visible from the first line and becomes especially strong in the third paragraph:

> Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till’s guts. But, as they say, money isn’t everything.

Burgess knew what he was doing—his erudition in English, other languages (especially Malay and Russian), and experimental fiction is impressive—and countless critics have produced countless pieces of criticism about him and especially about this particular novel. Without *A Clockwork Orange* we would perhaps not have *Trainspotting*; Welsh’s admiration for

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18 The linguistic behavior of the fictional (and entirely imaginary) gang of which Alex is the leader has been analogized to that of the sorts of real-world hooligans to whom Halliday applied the term “anti-language”: see Roger Fowler, “Anti-Language in Fiction,” in *Literature as Social Discourse: The Practice of Linguistic Criticism*, 142–61 (London: Batsford, 1981 [1979]).
Burgess’s artistry is evident from his introduction to the Folio edition.²²

Alex’s Nadsat works rather differently from Renton’s language(s). The most immediately striking feature of the quoted passage is lexical. Words such as *deng* and *veck* do not belong to any dialect or form of English, from 1962 or otherwise. Burgess developed the language, whose name is derived from the Russian suffix used for numbers in the teens (*-nadtsat’*), to convey a placeless and timeless (though future) world in which the Anglophone and Soviet spheres have merged. Indeed, many of the words are themselves lightly modified Russian lexemes: *deng* from *den’gi* “money,” for example, and *veck* from the final syllable of *chelovek* “person.” These lexical substitutions are almost entirely regular. Wordplay is important too: for instance, *ultra-violent* from *ultraviolet*. Burgess also characteristically blends the Russianesque and the ludic, as with *starry* from Russian *staryi* “old,” but a stellar English pun to boot.

Wordplay aside, our pataphilological point is that Alex’s language is non-intrinsic: there is no reason why a community could not function entirely in Nadsat, which is, after all, a dialect—albeit invented—of English. The only difference from Scots is that real people happen not to speak it. Any philological practice (pragmatics or etymology, say) that can be applied to a language could be applied to it. Yet *A Clockwork Orange* is atypical compared to the main works discussed in the next section in that, although we do not hear Nadsat on the radio, it is not entirely an isolate. In the second sentence of the novel, Alex describes his fellow gang-members as “my three droogs”—the last word derived from Russian *drug* “friend”—and this particular Burgessism has made it into the *Oxford English Dictionary*.²³ You can’t get more standard English than that: we’ve gone from his book to our world.


²³ *OED*, s.v. droog: “Anthony Burgess’s word for a member of a gang…; a young ruffian; an accomplice or henchman of a gang-leader.”
Russell Hoban (1925–2011) was born in Pennsylvania and moved in 1969 to London, where he remained until his death. Widely lauded for *The Mouse and His Child* (1968) and such other children’s books as the “Frances the Badger” series (1948–1970), he also wrote a large number of novels for adults. Easily the most prominent of these is *Riddley Walker*, first published in 1980 and re-released in an “expanded edition” in 1998. Set a couple thousand years after a nuclear war has thrust the surroundings back (or forward) to the Iron Age, the title character and exclusive narrator, a boy living in the southeastern part of England that we know as Kent, struggles to understand both the world he lives in and how it came to be as it is.24 Here is the opening:

On my naming day when I come 12 I gone front spear and kilt a wyld boar he parbly ben the las wyld pig on the Bundel Downs any how there hadnt ben none for a long time befor him nor I aint looking to see none agen. He dint make the groun shake nor nothing like that when he come on to my spear he wernt all that big plus he lookit poorly. He done the reqwyrt he ternt and stood and clattert his teef and made his rush and there we wer then. Him on 1 end of the spear kick- ing his life out and me on the other end watching him dy. I sayd, ‘Your tern now my tern later.’ The other spears gone in then and he wer dead and the steam coming up off him in the rain and we all yelt, ‘Offert!’25

Meet “Riddleyspeak,” Hoban’s name for this “breaking down and twisting of standard English,” a style he began developing through wordplay (“I like to play with sounds, and when

alone in the house I often talk in strange accents and nonsense words”). Although he referred to Riddlespeak as the product of “grammatical decline,” the linguistic construction represents a plausible depiction of a future English once an island in the North Sea (Riddley and his tribe call their environs “Inland”) has been cut off from international media and contact with speakers of foreign tongues. The transformations are thus not the product of language contact but of internal developments within an isolated speech community centered on Canterbury (“Cambry”).

These transformations encompass all aspects of language: phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, and (specific to the written rather than the implied spoken form) spelling and punctuation. Sounds have mutated in ways that are familiar to scholars of linguistic change across time and space; as with *Trainspotting*, it helps to read the novel out loud (and the more familiar you are with late-twentieth-century Kentish, the easier comprehension should be). Certain consonants have shifted (*teef* for *teeth*); clusters have been simplified (*las* for *last, groun* for *ground, dint* for *didn’t*); and there has been metathesis (*parbly* for *prob’ly, itself syncopated from probably*). The past tense and past participial ending -(i)t rather than -(e)d has largely taken over (*kilt, lookit, reqwyrt, ternt, clattert, yelt*) and auxiliaries have been dropped (*I gone, he done, the steam coming up*).Clauses run together, double negatives are standard (*there hadnt ben none, I aint looking to see none agen*), and some words have a different sense from what we are used to (*come 12, gone front spear, clattert his teef*). Also, periods are used sparingly and there is little other punctuation (commas introduce direct

27 Readers will find useful *Riddley Walker Annotations* (http://www.errorbar.net/rw), “a collaborative project devoted to analysis of Russell Hoban’s very good 1980 novel.”
28 So-called “th-fronting” is found in a number of dialects today, including Estuary English.
29 We might expect *en* for *end* and, even more, *an* for *and;* Hoban in some places compromised consistency for the sake of readability.
speech). The final word of the quoted paragraph, “Offert!,” presumably the phonological and morphological continuation of our word *offered*, owes its *Lord of the Flies*-like pragmatic force in part to its similarity to the German word *opfern* and its past participle *(ge)opfert*, which means “sacrificed.”

Sacrifice is the dominant theme of the novel. The picaresque plot chronicles Riddley’s encounters and culminates in the rediscovery of gunpowder, thus reproducing in miniature the collapse of the preceding civilization: ours. Riddley has to negotiate with tribal leaders (such as “Goodparley”), parry the manipulations of the titular leader of the non-polity (the “Ardship of Cambry”), and decode the encrypted meanings within folk songs and riddles, not to mention the Punch and Judy-derived religion of the “Eusa show” cult. This cult derives from the wall painting “The Legend of St Eustace,” a late-fifteenth-century masterpiece visible to anyone who visits Canterbury Cathedral today. The tale the painting tells has overshadowed even the depicted Jesus (“Littl Man the Addom,” a brilliant portmanteau of Adam, the atom, and the image of Christ on the Cross being pulled in two directions until he splits), and the locals have interpreted it as a rich narrative of the collapse and its salvific content.³⁰ The plot of *Riddley Walker* is not complicated, but Riddley—being twelve and without educational resources—takes a long time to put the pieces together. As in *A Clockwork Orange*, linguistic form serves content, and Hoban put it aptly: “Technically [Riddleyspeak] works well with the story because it slows the reader down to Riddley’s rate of comprehension.”³¹

The divergence between the reader’s rate of comprehension and Riddley’s comes to the fore in an especially striking encounter with another language. Midway through the novel,

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Goodparley shows Riddley “a peace of paper” and tells him, “Have a read of this.”

The document is titled “The Legend of St Eustace” and is written in late-twentieth-century English (very close to the language of this essay); we immediately recognize it as a tourist brochure that describes the wall painting in the Cathedral (“The date of the painting is about 1480; the work is highly skilled in an English tradition and is a magnificent example of wall painting of this date”). Both Goodparley and Riddley have seen the work of art. They do not, however, recognize any relationship between it and the text — or between either one and the Eusa cult — and they in fact have a hard time understanding the text at all:

Wel soon I begun to read it I had to say, ‘I dont even know ½ these words. Whats a Legend? How dyou say a guvner S with a littl t?’

Goodparley said, ‘I can as plain the mos of it to you. Some parts is easyer workit out nor others there is bits of it wewl never know for cern jus what they mean. What this writing is its about some kynd of picter or dyergam which we dont have that picter all we have is the writing. Parbly that picter ben some kynd of a seakert thing becaws this here writing (I dont mean the writing youre holding in your han I mean the writing time back way back what this is wrote the same as) its cernly seakert. Its blipful it aint jus only what it seems to be its the syn and foller of some thing else. A Legend thats a picter whats depicted which is to say pictert on a wall its done with some kynd of paint callit fidelity. St is short for sent. Meaning this bloak Eustace he dint jus tern up he were sent. A.D. 120 thats the year count they use to have it gone from Year 1 right the way to Bad Time. A.D. means All Done. 120 years all done theyre saying thats when they begun this picter in 120 nor they never got it finisht til 1480 is what it says here wel you know there aint no picter cud take 1360

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32 Hoban, Riddley Walker, 123.
years to do these here year numbers is about some thing else may be wewl never know what.33

What Goodparley and Riddley are doing here with a language they might think of as “old English” is not fundamentally different from what Gordin and Katz did a couple of paragraphs ago with a language we might think of as “postmodern English”: both are philological — and pataphilological — practice in action. Goodparley and Riddley are “mis-” or “over-” reading, something Hoban wants contemporary readers to notice; twentieth-century standard English is not an isolate. Similarly, Gordin and Katz may be mis- or over- reading as well, although it is precisely the isolated quality of Riddleyspeak that makes definitive judgments impossible. In our opinion, such “errors” matter little in comparison with the general philological point: results of interpretation are less significant than techniques of interpretation, and such techniques, which bring together linguistic change, wordplay, and folk-etymology, are in fact a standard way for people to align their modes of speaking about the world with the world itself.34

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33 Ibid., 124–25. Riddley copies out, on another “peace of paper” (29), what he considers the canonical version of “The Eusa Story” (chapter 6, 30–36). This long precedes any mention of the painting, and Hoban leaves the connection obscure. It begins: “Wen Mr Clever wuz Big Man uv Inland thay had evere thing clever.”

Representing future worlds requires—or at least might require—creating non-intrinsic philological isolates simply because we have no firm idea what a future language might be like. But it does not follow that such creations are a matter only for the future. More common are efforts to produce linguistic forms that map onto the past, a past about whose languages we often have greater clarity (thanks to the work of philologists, among others). In English, we need only point to Thomas Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*, a late-twentieth-century (1997) American novel that seeks to replicate the prosody and general style of Laurence Sterne’s eighteenth-century English, and to Anthony Burgess’s final novel, *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993), which does something similar for the life and language of the sixteenth-century playwright Christopher Marlowe. These are attempts to produce—better: reproduce—premodern linguistic forms with a postmodern plot. One could in principle do the same for the eleventh century and compose a novel in Old English. Such an effort would likely perplex readers today even more than “old English” flummoxes Riddley and Goodparley. What if someone were instead to create a postmodern language for a premodern plot and renew, as it were, Old English?

Here is the beginning of the entry for the year 1066 in the *Peterborough Chronicle*, the so-called E-text of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, an account of English history from the late ninth century to the middle of the twelfth:

Millesimo.lxvi. On þissum geare man halgode þet mynster æt Westmynstre on Cilda ðætædæg, 7 se cyng Eadward forðferde on twelfta ðætædæfæn, 7 hine mann bebyrgede on twelftan ðætædæg innan þære niwa halgodre circean æt Westmynstre. 7 Harold eorl fæng to ðætælændes cyne-rice swa swa se cyng hit him geuðe, 7 eac men hine þæerto geçuræn, 7 wæs gebletsod to cyng æt twelftan ðætædæg.
7 þy ilcan geare þe he cyng wæs, he for ut mid sciphere toge-
anes Willelme.35

The reader may appreciate a translation:

1066. In this year [1065] the minster at Westminster was
consecrated on Holy Innocents’ Day, and the king Edward
passed away on the eve of Twelfth Night, and was buried on
Twelfth Night inside the newly consecrated church in West-
minster. And Earl Harold succeeded to the kingdom of Eng-
land just as the king granted it him — and also men chose
him for it — and was blessed as king on Twelfth Night. And
the same year in which he became king, he went out against
William with a raiding ship-army.36

Now, here is another account of 1066:

see i had cnawan yfel was cuman when i seen this fugol gli-
dan ofer
a great blaec fugol it was not of these lands it flown slow
ofer the ham one daeg at the time of first ploughan. its necc
was long its eages afyr and on the end of its fethra was a mans
fingors all this i seen clere this was a fugol of deofuls. in still-
ness it cum and slow so none may miss it or what it had for
us. this was eosturmonth in the year when all was broc
what is this fugol i saes to my wifman37

While the reader may appreciate a translation of this as well, it
isn’t really necessary. A few orthographic substitutions, a little
familiarity with another Germanic language (e.g., German Vo-

Irvine (Cambridge: Brewer, 2004), 86.
36 The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, trans. and ed. M.J. Swanton (London: Dent,
1996), 195 and 197 (footnotes omitted).
occupies the narrator greatly in the early pages, e.g., “i was specan of this
fugol i will not spec yet of the frenc” (11).
gel “bird”), some acquaintance with the history of English, and
the passage is almost transparent. Almost. What is this?

In 2014, the English writer Paul Kingsnorth (b. 1972), a resi-
dent of Ireland known for his journalism, ecological and politi-
cal activism, and cofounding of the “Dark Mountain Project,”
published a novel titled The Wake about the Norman apoca-
lypse of 1066 and its immediate aftermath as seen through the
eyes of Buccmaster of Holland (Lincolnshire), a cantankerous
village grandee who loses his family and livelihood after the in-
vasion and assembles a band of what today might be called ter-
orists that “feohts for angland.” In many ways, the language
Kingsnorth invents for Buccmaster is Hoban’s Riddleyspeak
turned on its head: postmodern premodern Once-English rather
than premodern postmodern Future-English.

In Riddleyspeak, as we have seen, consonants are dropped
and clusters simplified. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in Kingsnorth’s
language—we will follow Buccmaster in calling it “Anglisc,”
though we capitalize the word—consonants appear to be add-
ed, though from the implied historical point of view they have
been restored, for they were there in Old English but have been
lost over the course of the millennium: the g’s of fugol, eages,

38 The publication history is atypical. Kingsnorth financed the writing of the book through the crowdfunding publishing website Unbound. Following extremely enthusiastic reviews and longlisting for the Man Booker Prize, the book was taken up by Graywolf Press in the United States, reaching a much broader audience. His latest novel, Beast (conceived as the second part in a trilogy begun by The Wake), was released in the United Kingdom in July 2016 by Faber & Faber.


41 “[P]seudo-O[ld]E[nglish]” is what Kingsnorth himself calls it, though he means the choice of words, not the structure of the language in general. This is one reason why we have opted for Buccmaster over Kingsnorth. More significant, however, are the loaded implications that come with the prefix “pseudo-” (see above, with footnote 6).
and *daeg* (all words in Old English\(^{42}\)) have become the glides *w* and *y* (*fowl*, *eyes*, and *day*),\(^{43}\) and the etymology of *woman* as a compound of *wif* (cf. *wife*) and *man* becomes visible. Other obvious linguistic features are the marking of verbal forms with a final syllable *-an*, sometimes for a present participle (*was cuman*, *seen ...* *glidan*, *first ploughan*), sometimes for a past one (*had cnawan*), as well as the use (not part of actual Old English) of past participial forms for the simple past (*i seen*, *it flown*, *it cum*).\(^{44}\) Where we would write *v*’s, Anglisc has *f*’s (*yfel*, *ofer*, *afyr*, *deofuls*); there are no capital letters; and there is even less punctuation than in Riddleyspeak (nothing but periods, and these only sparingly). The effect, as in *Riddley Walker*, is to intentionally alienate the reader.

There is, however, an important difference in ontogeny: whereas Hoban began his experimentation through an expressed interest in wordplay and its relationship to the rules of linguistic change, Kingsnorth began from regularity (“I tried to hem it in with some rules”). In fact, Kingsnorth’s *Buccmaster* seems to eschew wordplay entirely. Kingsnorth is explicit in “A Note on Language” (one of two afterwords to the novel) about both the rationale for the language and the method by which he produced it:

> The first and most important rule was that I wanted to use only words which originated in Old English. The vast majority of the vocabulary of this novel consists of words that, in one form or another, existed in English 1000 years ago. The exceptions are cases where words did not exist for what I wanted to say, or where those that did were so obscure today,
or hard to pronounce or read, that they would have detracted excessively from the flow of the tale.\textsuperscript{45}

He goes on to describe two orthographic rules (“I did not use letters which did not exist in Old English” and “I wanted to render as many OE pronunciations as I could on the page”\textsuperscript{46}), to comment on “the catholicism of my approach to the language, old and new,”\textsuperscript{47} and to stress that “[t]here was one final rule I set myself, and it was this: all of the previous rules could be overridden, if necessary, by a meta-rule, which functioned as a kind of literary thegn: do what the novel needs you to do.”\textsuperscript{48}

All this speaks to the method but not the rationale. Why, after all, would someone write a novel “in a tongue which no one has ever spoken, but which is intended to project a ghost image of the speech patterns of a long-dead land: a place at once alien and familiar”?\textsuperscript{49} In harmony with Kingsnorth’s general approach, the logic is both aesthetic and intellectual (though decidedly not practical):

This novel is not written in Old English — that would be unreadable to anyone except scholars. It is written instead in what might be called a shadow tongue — a pseudo-language intended to convey the feeling of the old language by combining some of its vocabulary and syntax with the English we speak today.\textsuperscript{50}

There would be no point in using a non-intrinsic isolate if it did nothing to further the plot of the novel. There are many ways in

\textsuperscript{45} Paul Kingsnorth, “A Note on Language,” in \textit{The Wake}, 353. As in actual Old English, there are a very few words in Anglisc that originate in Latin, e.g., \textit{corona} “crown” and \textit{preost} “priest” (from post-Classical Latin \textit{presbyter}, itself a borrowing from Greek).

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 353–54.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 355.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 355. Note that Kingsnorth makes explicit, in a way Hoban does not, both the rules and the possibility of bending them for aesthetic purposes.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 356.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 353. Once again, we reiterate our reservations about “pseudo-.”
which Anglisc does this, but we point to one specific contrast with the premodern postmodern language of *Riddley Walker*. When Riddley and Goodparley discuss the text about St. Eustace, they demonstrate their awareness of linguistic change over historical time. Although Kingsnorth’s own immersion in historical sources and scholarship is impressive, his Buccmaster displays no corresponding awareness. He understands languages as mutually exclusive independent entities, as in this passage:

> well now that all this is gan there is yonge folc in this land who is forgettan already how things was. there is yonge folcs in angland now who nefer cnawan a time before there was frenc ofer them nefer cnawan a time when our cyngs and our thegns spac with us in our own tunge nefer cnawan what it is to lif in a land where all the ground is not tacan by one man and this man an ingenga

In Buccmaster’s view, the young must speak either Anglisc or Frenc; they will not speak the evolving mixture that will come to be known as English.\(^\text{52}\) This either-or framework extends to politics, religion, and all other aspects of life:

> they is afeart i saes all afeart for the eald ways is stronger than their crist
> men from the ham has been lystnan to this and saen naht but now one specs. i can not see his nebb well in the light of the fyr
> this is blaec specan he saes we sceolde not spec lic this no mor
> thu is a wyrm then i saes and no anglisc man
> i is anglisc he saes as anglisc as thu but the eald ways is de-orc and if the preost hears of this our ham will be deorc also

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\(^{52}\) This is not surprising since it took well more than a generation to introduce the massive amount of “French” vocabulary that we now take for granted: see Elaine Treharne, *Living through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
the preost has thy beallucs in his hands then i saes we feohts for angland we will spec as we wolde
but the eald ways the eald gods all of this is gan saes this man. it is all of the eald times the deorc times these is the times of the crist and we is his men. there is no need to spec lic this now

Buccmaster does not know that he is a character in a novel and would probably not call his narrative “The Wake.” Nonetheless, there are a number of reasons why Kingsnorth might have chosen this title. The one to which he himself calls attention in “A Note on History” (the second afterword) is the existence of Hereward the Wake, a brigand of the eleventh century. “Hereward was certainly real,” Kingsnorth writes, but “there is no evidence that this nickname was.” That is no deterrent to using the reference as the title, however, since “[n]ovelists can do that sort of thing.”

To connoisseurs of literature, any reference to a “wake” in a novel that experiments radically with the English language inevitably summons a very specific association: *Finnegans Wake* (1939) by James Joyce (1882–1941). This is the totemic ur-source for any non-intrinsic philological isolate—even though it isn’t written in one. Joyce’s language is certainly an isolate, but it is quintessentially intrinsic: only Joyce himself commands the idiom, which is extraordinarily high on wordplay but has no rules in the sense that every lexical innovation satisfied his personal—unarticulated and inarticulable—aesthetic judgment. It is easy to imagine another novel written in Nadsat; any new attempt to produce “Wakespeak” would fail.

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55 Illustrative of this point is the fact that the work that in many senses comes closest to bending the language in the manner of *Finnegans Wake* is Joyce’s own *Ulysses* (1922).
Take the familiar opening page of the novel:

"civerrrun, past Eve and Adam's, from averse of shore to bend of bay, brings us by a commodious vicus of recirculation back to Bowth Castle and Environs. Sir Tristram, violer d'amores, fr'over the short sea, had passen- core arrived from North Armorica on this side the straggly isthmus of Europe Minor to wielderfight his peninsulate war, nor had topwyayer's rocks by the stream Ocones exaggerated themselves to Laurens County's gorgios while they went doublin their numper all the time; nor avoice from afire bellowed miske miske to lautaftu thurigestrickis not yet, though weniasoon after; had a kidsad buttended a bland old isaac: not yet, though all's fair in vanceoy, were sooc seethers wroth with twonc nathandjoe. Rot a peck of pa's malt had Jhem or Sheg brewed by arclight and rory end to the regginbrow was to be seen ringsome on the aquafac. The fall [bababadalsharactakminarronkommbrontonmor- ronntuowntunrovargarhounawskawntoohooodensenthur- nukl] of a once wallastrait oldsparr is retaile early in bed and later on life down through all christian minstrelsy. The great fall of the ofwall entailed at such short notice the pftjaschute of Finnegan, erse solid man, that the humpyhillhead of humself prumgly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumpbytuncoes; and their upturnpikepointendplace is at the knock out in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since dev- lins first loved livvy."

This particular version of the text is copied from *Finnegans Wiki*; the gray elements are hyperlinks to interpretations and references, often very philologically elaborate ones. A wide variety of people have inserted references; the important point for us is what does and does not get annotated (at least as of June 28, 2016). You will note that the only elements left unexplained are **after**; **and**; **and their**; **brings us**; **down from**; **his**; **is**; **not yet**; **though**; **of**; **of a once**; **of his**; **of the**; **on the**; **that the**; **the**; **to**; **to the**; **was to be seen**; **and were**. Every word here is Germanic; every word here is what is sometimes called an Anglo-Saxon monosyllable (though **their** is a borrowing from Scandinavian); and every word here except **brings** and **seen** is a function word or copula, that is to say, an article, preposition, pronoun, or other small lexeme that holds the language together but is not a major vehicle of content. In the eyes of many of his readers, then, Joyce's astonishing inventiveness does not extend to the fundamental building blocks of the language.

*Finnegans Wake* is the granddaddy of all the works we have discussed (and so many more). Despite the tremendous difficulties it poses to readers, it is indisputably part of the canon.

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of English literature. That such a work occupies a high position in the esteem of critics grants permission, if you will, to writers and publishers to entertain myriad other flights of experimentation. Some are successful (aesthetically or linguistically), many are not; all are Joyce’s progeny. In some instances, the debts are publicly recognized, as in Anthony Burgess’s wonderful Re Joyce, one of the best introductions of the entire œuvre for the lay reader. More often, though, the debts are left even less acknowledged than the gentle nod in Kingsnorth’s title.

Obviously there were interesting experiments with English prose before Joyce, but the towering status of Finnegans Wake in experimental literature is uncontested. The fact that the particular works we examine take Joyce as their point of departure—explicitly or not—has generic implications. As noted at the start of the paper, most of the works we discuss are British, postwar, written in the first person, male, and post-apocalyptic. Let us begin with the first. The majority of the authors were born British (like Joyce, whose Dublin was a British, as well as Irish, city in those days) or elected Britain as their home. They differ from Joyce in exclusively setting their works in a post-apocalyptic future or past; whatever else it may be, Finnegans Wake cannot be characterized as post-apocalyptic (or even set in any particular time). The novel was published only months before the outbreak of the most destructive war in European, and world, history. The trauma of that war, and the permanently looming apocalypse of the nuclear weapons that appeared at the conflict’s conclusion, darken all the works in Finnegans Wake’s wake.

Explaining the dominance of the first-person voice is straightforward: if you wish to create an idiolect, it is helpful to have an “idiot,” that is, a unique voice embodying the language and worldview. (A striking feature of Finnegans Wake is that it is a disembodied idiolect.) In our view the characteristic

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masculinity is potentially connected: first, the authors are men, and first-person narratives written by men tend to adopt a male point of view; second, the authors of works set in the future, principally but not exclusively science fiction, have historically been overwhelmingly male; and third, more tentatively, one might identify a certain rhetorical machismo in bravura linguistic performance.⁵⁸

Finnegans Wake is in some sense unreadable — and it is probably the only highly acclaimed English-language work by a major author that cannot be used for a win (or, rather, a loss) in the game “Humiliation,” invented by David Lodge in his 1975 campus novel Changing Places. This is because, although it is in English, most people would not immediately concede the point. As our final example, we contrast it with a work that is not in English at all — or, indeed, in any other canonical, card-carrying language — and yet is easily understandable to any well-educated person who knows English.⁵⁹

Here is a passage in a short story — we can call it a detective story, though that bends the genre slightly — that deals with a not-too-distant future when China overtakes the administration of the European Union:

After algunos tiempos, manige manageros from Cabillot schola was enroled por importante jobs. Und presto nomanno coudde los understande. Eine colossale incomprehenshione presto blocked alles Chinese administratone in Europa. Der Chinese governor coudde nicht unterstande wat was happeningante. Alles der Chinese power structura was

⁵⁸ The last point is often alluded to in literary controversies. See, e.g., the kerfuffle surrounding Jonathan Franzen’s essay “Mr. Difficult” in The New Yorker 78, no. 29 (September 30, 2002): 100–11. The masculine title is revealing.

⁵⁹ We surmise this from an admittedly small and uncontrolled sample of students and colleagues who have read the text. All of them know English, and many of them know another European language as well. It is quite possible that the work would also be straightforwardly understandable to someone who knew two or three European languages other than English, but — given the global position of English today and the vagaries of education — the experiment is harder to conduct.
fallingante. Quarrelose disputes erupted pourquoi superiores unterstudee nicht inferiores und orders coudde not transmitte. Alles Chinesos in Bruxel spoke perfecte Europanto und believed dat esse English. From Beijingo commandantes unterstudee nicht wat lingua was seine Europese manageros speakante. Rapido, der invasive Chinese machine tilted.60

From the text, we know this is “Europanto,” but what is that? As it turns out, the main character, Inspector Cabillot, doesn’t quite know either. When, in another story (“Cabillot versus der malefiko Finnko”), he takes an obligatory language examination (“examen test”), he “coudde chose nicht” among three options for “How dixit in Europanto ‘I love you’”?61 If anyone knows the answer, it is Diego Marani (b. 1959). In 1996, Marani, an Italian who has worked as a translator for the European Union in Brussels, invented this international auxiliary language, a satirical take on both the most famous such construction, the Esperanto of L.L. Zamenhof (1859–1917), and the macaronic quality of contemporary European affairs.62 Perhaps best known for his novel Nuova grammatica finlandese (2000), translated by Judith Landry as New Finnish Grammar (2011),63 Marani has published numerous newspaper columns in Europanto, as well as the collection of tales from which the passage above comes, Las adven-

60 Diego Marani, Las adventures des Inspector Cabillot (Sawtry: Dedalus, 2012), 107.
61 The options are: “A. Ich turbo toi[.] B. Ich amorante van toi[.] C. Me palpito por toi” (23–24).
62 In his 1939 novel The Confidential Agent, Graham Greene’s title character meets his contact, the Kafkaesque “K,” at a language school where the latter teaches Entrenationo. Obviously drawn from the model of Esperanto, Entrenationo’s resemblance to the not-yet-invented Europanto is striking. This observation and some of the points we make in what follows are also noted in Tim Conley and Stephen Cain, Encyclopedia of Fictional and Fantastic Languages (Westport: Greenwood, 2006), 3–4.
63 It will be clear from this paragraph that Marani has a thing about Finnish, a non-Indo-European European language that plays no role in Europanto. If it did, Marani’s Europantic excursions would be much less understandable to his likely audiences.
tures des Inspector Cabillot (2012). For reasons that should be obvious, we do not expect ever to see a translation.

In the terms set out above, Marani’s argot is evidently high on playfulness and not entirely devoid of rules. For example, Marani generally refrains from juxtaposing two words drawn from the same “source language,” though “algunos tiempos” at the beginning of the passage quoted above is an obvious exception. Our point is that such rules are routinely broken, presumably for reasons connected to Marani’s aesthetic judgment. Europanto is thus similar to Wakespeak (and distinct from the Anglisc of The Wake): it is an isolate—and it stands to reason that a philologically informed reading would be interesting—but it

64 There is in fact a surprising history behind Europanto and its ruledness. While all citations of Las adventures des Inspector Cabillot in this essay come from the 2012 British edition, we note that Marani published a book of the same title in France over a dozen years earlier (Paris: Mazarine, 1999). The two works are far from identical: not only do they not have exactly the same chapters in exactly the same order (though there is some overlap), but there are, for reasons never explained, substantial differences in the grammar, lexicon, and orthography of Europanto itself. To select a single example, in the 2012 edition, the eponymous hero is described in the “Introductio” as follows: “Inspector Cabillot esse der autentiquo europeane polizero, fightingante contra der evil por eine Europa van pax und prosperity donde man speake eine unique lingua: Europanto” (7). In 1999, however, the “same sentence” reads: “Inspector Cabillot est el autentiquo europeano polizero qui fighte contra el mal por une Europa van pax und prosperity donde se speake una sola lingua: de Europanto” (29). We have already stated that if anyone knows Europanto, then it is Marani, but we cannot determine the validity of the modus ponens. Marani’s own knowledge has evidently changed substantially, with the later form having a significantly greater English (and also German) component. Thus, while Europanto is not devoid of rules, many of them are observed in the breach. To adapt a fragment of Heraclitus, no one besides Marani can write a book in Europanto—and neither can he.

65 We note a further connection between Marani and Joyce: Trieste. New Finnish Grammar takes place in this Italian city, and Marani has written a short book about the city’s literary genius loci, Italo Svevo (1861–1928): A Trieste con Svevo (2003). Svevo, as a side job, tutored an Irish émigré to the city in Italian and the local Triestine dialect; the latter, meanwhile, began composing an important novel in what was then a Habsburg port city. The student, obviously, was James Joyce, the novel Ulysses.
is utterly intrinsic. Attempts by others to speak or write Euro-
panto will probably be more successful than analogous efforts
with Wakespeak, but we expect that they will quickly degener-
ate. (Arguably, Marani’s own prose degenerates: in our experi-
ence, the experiment yields diminishing returns the more pages
one reads.) Marani’s ear is what makes the language work and
also what makes it so readable. Contrast his passage with the
following piece written by another Italian, drawn from a similar
Eurochimera, but one that is so strongly ruled that it tolerates
no exceptions:

Estis malvarmete ekstere, sed la ĉambro, kie ni sidis, estis
agrabile varma. Mia plej kara amiko, Ernesto, sidis kontraŭ
mi, donante sin plene al sia komforta brakseĝo. Jam dum unu
horo ni parolis Esperante kaj pasis de temo al temo. Estis vere
instiga plezuro aŭskulti lin; li tiom bone sidis en la lingvo.
Ordinare, kiam li parolas per sia gepatra lingvo: la angla,
mankas al li la verbo kaj esprimo,—sume, la muziko, kiu
montriĝas kiam li parolas Esperanton. Lia Esperanta prozo
estas poezio.66

These are the first sentences of Cezaro Rossetti’s 1950 novel
Kredu min, sinjorino! (Believe Me, Miss!), written in Esperanto.
We expect that most readers of this essay will agree that the
Rossetti passage is more difficult to comprehend than Marani’s
idiolect, and yet Esperanto — which has survived for well over a
century and continues to have thousands of devotees and even
native speakers — is certainly not an isolate.

In a number of ways, Las adventures des Inspector Cabillot is
an outlier. Though postwar and male, Marani does not have the
other properties we have highlighted. His tales are not written
in the first person. They are not post-apocalyptic; the detective
story is a conservative, largely formulaic genre; and the titu-
lar character projects wackiness rather than doom and gloom.

66 Cezaro Rossetti, Kredu min, sinjorino! ([Scheveningen]: Heroldo de Espe-
ranto, 1950), 7.
Most saliently, Marani is not British. Marani, no less than Europanto itself, represents Europeness, and we cannot fail to mention — writing this essay in Berlin the week after the Brexit vote — that Marani himself winks at the awkwardness of Great Britain’s place in Europe:

Was der jahro 2052. De Europeane Pax sich extended undisturbed from Portugallia zum Slovakkia, from Finlandia zum Cypro. Europa was indeed plus und plus grande. Aber ella was united und dat was essentiale. Germania was der leader country, in second platz come Franza, Nederlanda, Belgica, Luxemburga, Danelanda, Swedelanda, Finlandia, in terza platz come Italia, Espania, Ellenia, Portugallia. Dann come Polanda, Ungaria, Cekia, Slovakkia, Slovenia, Cypro und Turkelandia. Op bench reserva, come Grosse Britannia.67

Maybe it is post-apocalyptic after all?

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*Answers do not matter so much as questions, said the Good Fairy. A good question is very hard to answer. The better the question the harder the answer. There is no answer at all to a very good question.*
— Flann O’Brien68

Our paper began with a straightforward question: “What is a language?” In the Good Fairy’s terms, this is a good question but perhaps not a very good one. While we have not answered it (and do not propose to do so now), we believe that we have made progress. By concentrating on highly self-conscious linguistic experimentation in fiction — and within that, on the rule-bound rather than the playful — we have shown that the oddity of the subject matter is no barrier to the deployment of standard philological practices. The texts of particular interest

to us are composed in what we have called non-intrinsic philological isolates. In regard to the animating question, the term to focus on is “philological.”

We have not offered a definition of “philology” either, and quite deliberately. Our focus has been on practices of interpretation — used by those who call themselves philologists, but also by many who do not — with the aim to show that practices are where the stuff of any specific language becomes tractable. We would extend the point beyond philology to “a language”: just as philology is an abstract construct that denotes a collection of shared practices, so is “a language” (let’s take “English”) a collection of shared, specifically linguistic, practices. Each speaker of English makes use of particular practices in articulating his or her language, and these idiolects (highly mutually intelligible as a rule, but not utterly: Cambridge and Jamaica and Glasgow and Colombo and Fargo…) are grouped together as the thing we call “a language.” Every edge is blurry, but you can still distinguish it, especially if you practice. A non-intrinsic philological isolate is a language; pataphilology is philology.

Philology is pataphilology, but is a language a non-intrinsic philological isolate? That a language is philological is obvious. That it is non-intrinsic is equally obvious. (There is no such thing as a private language.69) What, however, about the claim that a language can be an isolate?

The languages we have discussed so far have been mostly fictional. This matters, no doubt, but not in the way you might expect. At issue is the relationship between the adjective “non-intrinsic” and the noun “isolate.” When the language in question is largely the product of an individual’s imagination, the two can function independently. Consider the isolates Wakespeak (intrinsic) and Riddleyspeak (non-intrinsic). In languages found in the wild, however, the two are strongly correlated, a relationship most visible when they are on the brink of extinction. Take,

for example, Apiaká, currently spoken, according to the latest census, by a single person in Brazil. There is no meaningful way to distinguish Apiaká from a non-intrinsic isolate; more people could speak this language, but they just happen not to. The last speaker of Apiaká, whose name the authors of this essay regrettably do not know, occupies the same position now that Dolly Pentreath of Mousehole occupied in the eighteenth century.

Arguably, Pentreath is the best-known candidate for “the last native speaker of Cornish.” The laurels for that dispiriting position are hotly contested. Pentreath died in 1777 and was the last person to speak Cornish natively, but she was bilingual in English and purists may (and do) contend that “the last native speaker of Cornish” should therefore be sought earlier, say with the monolingual Chesten Marchant (d. 1676). In any event, after Pentreath, Cornish entered a period when it was not even an isolate — it was simply not. In recent decades, though, there has been a movement underway to make Cornish great again. To be more precise, Southwestern Britain has seen not just what the census-takers call a “reawakening” of Cornish but a surprising number of aspirants to the tongue, with different linguistic necromancers pushing for the acceptance of their own boutique choices in such realms as vocabulary and orthography. Cornish is, of course, not an isolate from the perspective of historical/


comparative linguistics, being a member of the Celtic language family, which has other living, even flourishing, relatives today (notably Welsh); but it is also not an isolate as a phenomenon of language engineering. The nineteenth-century creation of Modern Hebrew was a stunningly successful variant of the same phenomenon of attempting to undo the isolated status of a non-intrinsic tongue.\(^7\) At the fringes, how about the thousand-or-so \textit{denaskuloj} (native speakers) of Esperanto or, even fringier, the devotees of the Klingon Language Institute in an era when every science-fiction franchise seems to require its own linguistic prop?\(^7\) The relationship to fiction is not accidental; indeed, it is pataphilologically necessary.

What of the (pata)philology of languages used by lifeforms beyond Earth, assuming that such lifeforms exist, that they are intelligent, and that they use (a) language? Is exo-linguistics (pata)philological? Do the practices that we have described here for languages from Old English to Scots and from Anglisc to revived Cornish — narrow in geographical scope, to be sure — apply in the wider universe? These are not questions anyone can answer yet, but once again it is a novel that provides what may be the best thought experiment: Stanisław Lem’s \textit{Głos pana} (1968), translated by Michael Kandel as \textit{His Master’s Voice} (1983), which goes through the problems with determining what even counts as a language in the absence of any of the usual historical and physical cues. Given the resources currently invested globally in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (\textsc{seti}) — peanuts in terms of science funding but handsome from a linguist’s point


of view\textsuperscript{74} — the lack of clarity in defining both “language” and “a
language” is a colossal shortfall. Pataphilologists to the rescue!\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{74} The annual budget around 2010 was on the order of 2.5 million US dollars,
the cost of operating the needed radio telescopes. To put this into context,
see the intriguing graphic at http://www.microcosmologist.com/blog/seti-infographic.

\textsuperscript{75} We dedicate this paper to our colleague David Bellos, who among other
distinctions is the founding director of the Program in Translation and
Intercultural Communication at Princeton University. In this capacity he
encouraged us to design a new class titled “Imagined Languages” and then
sponsored it when we taught it together in 2013 and 2015. We owe much to
the students in both iterations of the course, especially Yuval Wigderson,
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