

Speaking Like A God



They say human beings use language to make sense of their surroundings. We frame, categorise and systematise the objects around us with the help of nouns and verbs and adjectives. The sky is blue. The horse gallops swiftly. The sentence is a ridiculous rhetorical filler. We do this to understand each other, to convey information, give orders, ask for favours. To some, thought is practically unthinkable (!) without language. If there is no word for mother, then there is no mother—or, at the very least, no mother to speak of.

And yet when we've finally managed to raise and strengthen these structures enough to have some sort of conversation, we start picking them apart. We join the boy-scouts to sing gibberish like the Ging Gang Goolie; we giggle at Smurf-books with debates about whether an object should be called "a smurf-opener" or a "bottle-smurfer"; we can't be bothered with films in (real) languages we don't understand, but who can withstand the charm of a Klingon conversation?; we play computer games in simlish; listen to music in hopelandic and scat; devise made-up languages of our own—pig Latin, rhyme-slang, arpy-darpy—to cloak our darkest secrets from our parents and/or the police.

There are many theories about divine languages spoken by God, angels, Adam and Eve, languages of pure universal harmony. Some Pentecostal Christians speak in tongues—"glossolalia", as it's called—which is believed to be a holy language, perhaps from Eden and perhaps from Heaven itself. These people fall into some sort of trance and start speaking something which resembles a language, and indeed has linguistic structures, although the sounds usually originate from the speaker's native tongue. These divine languages sound mostly like gibberish—like complicated pig-Latin or simplified Klingon, like very basic sound-poetry—at least to the uninitiated. Religious zealots from the glossolalian's particular sect would, of course, be more likely to sense "the presence of God" than the presence of, let's say, hopelandic.

In the 13th century the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, had his servant experiment on newborns to see if, undisturbed by human languages, the infants would eventually start speaking in the language of God (presumed to be Hebrew, Latin, Arabic or Greek). The infants were completely isolated from hearing any language. They never spoke and they died for they could not live without "the gladness of countenance."

Jacob Grimm, of the famous Brothers Grimm, theorised that if God speaks any language involving dental consonants, He must have teeth, and

since teeth are made for eating and not for speaking, He must not only be a talker but also an eater which, as the Dutch philosopher Frits Staal put it (according to Wikipedia): "leads to so many other undesirable assumptions that we better abandon the idea altogether." We can only assume that Staal means He might speak with His mouth full.

Poetry, as everyone knows, is full of gibberish. Not only are poets often deliberately labyrinthine as well as voracious neologists and portmanteurs—making up new words with varying degrees of sanity—but some of them actually attempt to write pure nonsense, utterly bereft of any sense. The Russian Futurists wrote poems in a language they called Zaum, a transrational language to awaken the creative imagination from its drowsy everyday existence. The Dada-poets had Hugo Ball's Karawane and Dada-Mertz had Kurt Schwitters' opus magnum, the Ur Sonata. Since the beginning of the twentieth-century sound-poetry has a non-stop history. But even before the birth of the so-called avant-garde, there was nonsensical poetry. In Iceland, Æri-Tobbi wrote his tercets and quatrains in the 17th century; in 13th century Catalonia the troubadour Cerverí de Girona had his own songs of gibberish, and 16th century Italy had Teofilo Folengo. The history of poetry is blotted high and low with work of such inspired delirium.

Perhaps, deep down inside, we are not as impressed by "actual" language as we sometimes let on. Perhaps we feel there are other ways of using and abusing our tongue, our language centres and vocal cords—a thinking beyond mere meaning. Like screaming. Like laughing. Grunting. Like giggling. And then, if I'm allowed to quote "meaningful" poetry to drive my point home, perhaps Emily Dickinson had something like gibberish in mind when she wrote "Much madness is divinest sense / To the discerning eye; / Much sense the starkest madness." And maybe Kurt Schwitters said it all, when he said: "Ziiuu ennze ziiuu nnskrmmüüü, / ziiuu ennze ziiuu rinnzkrmmüüü; / rakete bee bee, rakete bee zee". ☘

The Pictures In Our Heads



With stardust in our eyes and worthless fluff on our minds it's difficult to perceive reality. The glamorous shine is too bright, the din too distracting, to even see the doors behind which deals are being made that seal the fate of a nation, potentially for generations to come. We're too concerned with celebrity gossip and the anecdotes of acclaimed hot shots of the film industry to educate ourselves on the deals being made by our business leaders and politicians—and wasn't that the same guy that screwed everybody over just last year? How's that for juicy gossip?

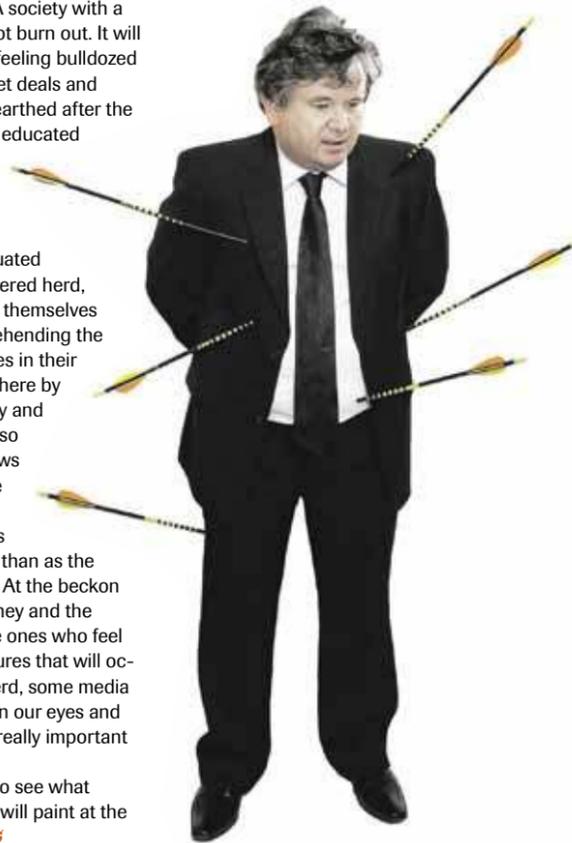
We wonder, sometimes to ourselves and sometimes even aloud, why people don't seem to care. Why people don't show up to protest anymore when their country is being sold. Why people don't seem bothered with the ongoing involvement of corrupt, immoral and criminal men and women in Iceland's economy—the economy that they murdered but the re-growth of which they feel entitled to play a part in and financially benefit from. Not enough people are paying attention, not enough people are blowing whistles, not enough people care to inform themselves. Or is it that the very people charged with informing the public have gone to bed with the corrupt among us?

The media is the watchdog of the

people in a functioning society. It is in a privileged position that comes with the responsibility of passing along pertinent information to the masses, the people not able or allowed to see what goes on behind the velvet rope. A society with a functioning media will not burn out. It will not tire from constantly feeling bulldozed by the onslaught of secret deals and corporate deception unearthed after the fact. It will be active and educated and in power—fitting since democracy is, by definition, power by the people.

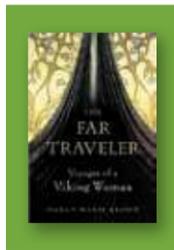
Walter Lippmann equated mass society to a bewildered herd, incapable of thinking for themselves and incapable of comprehending the world beyond the pictures in their heads, the pictures put there by the powerful and wealthy and the media (technically also part of the herd) that bows to power and wealth, the media that functions as a lap dog of corporations and governments rather than as the watchdog of the people. At the beckon call of the ones with money and the ones with power and the ones who feel entitled to paint the pictures that will occupy the heads of the herd, some media is trained to throw dust in our eyes and distract us from what is really important in life.

It will be interesting to see what pictures Davíð Oddsson will paint at the helm of Morgunblaðið. ☘
- CATHARINE FULTON



The Far Traveler: Voyages of a Viking Woman

Nancy Marie Brown
Harcourt (2007)



The title and blurb of this book leads you to think it's about Guðrīður Þorbjarnardóttir, the wife of Þorfinnur Karlsefni and mother of Snorri Þorfinnsson, the first European child to be

born on the North American continent. But in fact, *The Far Traveler* is a very general book about literature, ships, North Atlantic settlement, archaeology, and Christianization in the Viking Age. It puts women's experiences in the foreground, and it does talk about Guðrīður, but it's not really about her or her voyages.

The Far Traveler works best as an intro to the scholars who have tried to reconstruct life in the medieval north through archaeology, genetics, anthropology and literary studies. Indeed, Brown's background is as a science writer and she is skilled at interviewing

scientists. Her interest in Iceland dates back to studying Old Norse literature in college.

Some of the better passages in the book are about Brown's own experience volunteering on a dig in Skagafjörður. The images the book left me with are archaeological: excavating a farm in Greenland as it's being eroded by a rushing river; Brown's visit to L'Anse aux Meadows, the Viking site in Newfoundland; a face-off over whether to strip turf layers by hand or with a backhoe; scraping away ash layers and looking for the old walls of a longhouse in Skagafjörður.

Brown speaks with a number of scientists who cast doubt on Jared Diamond's perhaps faddish theory that the Greenland colony collapsed because Icelanders couldn't adapt their palates to local resources like fish.

Brown pursues a few special topics. Chapter 3 muses on the sexual independence of women in pre-Christian Europe as opposed to the Christian idealization of virginity. Chapter 9 is a detailed discussion of Viking Age techniques for weaving cloth. Chapter 10 describes how the sagas saw the transition from paganism to Christianity.

The book meanders. It was difficult to follow the story of Guðrīður. I was

never able to keep her life story straight. A relationship chart of her immediate family would have helped. Better maps and a few inexpensive black-and-white photographs would also have made the book more attractive. The book does provide a nice annotated bibliography of books on Viking Age Iceland.

By the end of the book, I got the feeling that at some point the author's agent or editor looked at a manuscript or book proposal about the Viking Age in general and said "Don't you think we could reshape this around a more saleable theme? This Guðrīður, maybe use her life story to structure the book with? And definitely beef up the women's history angle here. Sprinkle in some goddess references and yes, do that weaving chapter." If the text of the book never quite caught up with this idea, that would explain why it's a bit at odds with the book's title.

Brown has written a previous book about Icelandic horses. She is a companionable and sincere author, with a genuine interest in the North. Overall, I'd recommend this book to medieval Iceland buffs. But the story of Guðrīður never quite comes together and the book doesn't quite stand out enough to urge on general readers.

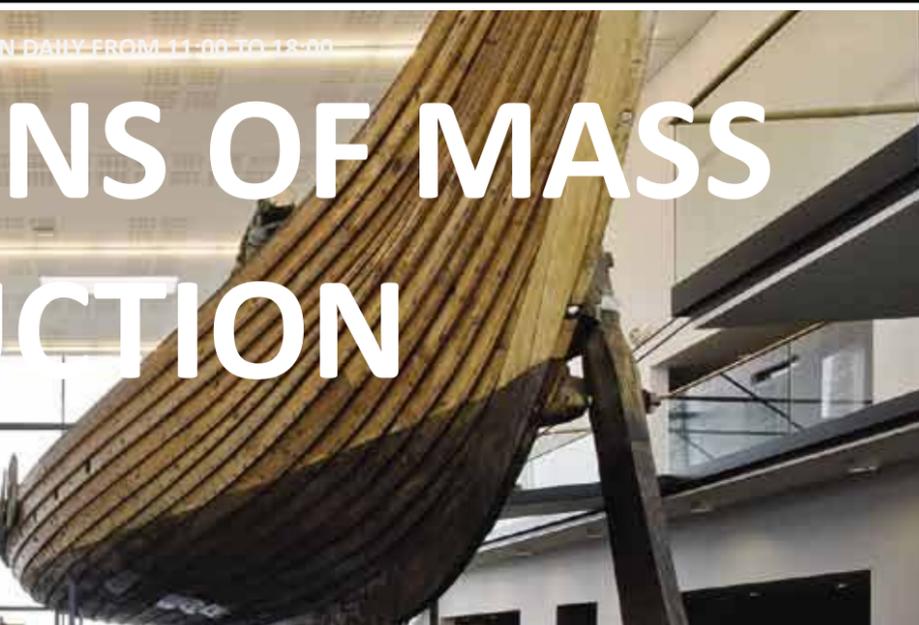
☘ - IAN WATSON



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