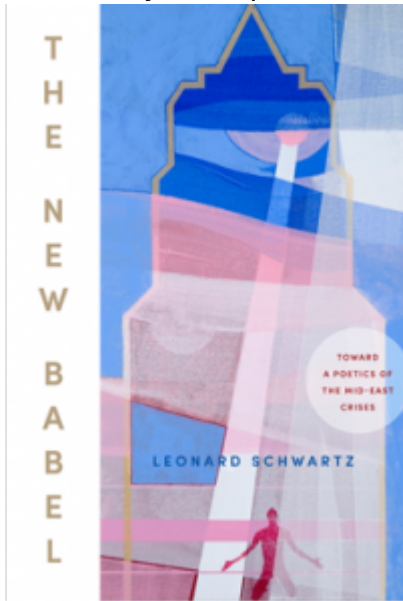


# The New Babel by Leonard Schwartz

written by Joseph Houlihan | June 29, 2017



*The New Babel* by Leonard Schwartz

The University of Arkansas Press, 2016

190 pages – [University of Arkansas Press](#) / [Amazon](#)

For many years Leonard Schwartz has produced incisive conversations across academic fields of creative inquiry. From Evergreen State College, he hosts the radio program *Cross Cultural Poetics*, inviting poets to collaborate and share their works, opening up an expansive space. The work is generous and productive.

*The New Babel* comes from over a decade's worth of engagement. It's comprised of poems, essays, and interviews. And it's a crackling, electrified companion; a monkey wrench in a time of normalized violence.

## **I. The Possibility of Lament**

In many ways, *The New Babel* reflects years of conversations. And it should be taken, in the very least, as an excellent jumping off point into Schwartz's dedicated inquiry. The text includes interviews with Aharon Shabtai, Amiri Baraka, and Michael Hardt. As well as essays on Celan, Scholem, Buber and Benjamin. As a text, it emerges from a tradition of long form poetics imagining alternate possibilities for the future of the Middle East.

Like Ammiel Alcalay's *from the warring factions*, or Mahmoud Darwish's *Memory for Forgetfulness*, *The New Babel* begins by evoking a single moment of violence, the American bombing of an Afghan hamlet, Madoo, in somber elegy.

On December 1, 2001 the United States bombed Madoo, a hamlet of fifteen houses killing fifty-five civilians.

Schwartz returns to this event as a kind of reaction against the dehumanizing of technological warfare. He appropriates the official language of *The New York Times*:

“Perhaps someday there will be a reckoning for this tiny village of 15 houses, all of them obliterated into splintered wood and dust by American bombs. United States military officials might explain why 55 people died here...But more likely, Madoo will not learn whether the bombs fell by mistake or on purpose, and the matter will be forgotten amid the larger consequences of war. It is left an anonymous hamlet with anonymous people buried in anonymous graves.

And then he shifts registers,

“Madoo’s farmers are people in pieces. They’ve become their own fertilizer...

After Madoo, to write poetry is barbaric (Theodor Adorno)...

The word “Madoo” is a transcription of a Pashto name the reporter must have sounded out...

In English, then, “Madoo.”

In English the name “Madoo derives from an old Scottish word meaning “my dove.””

*The New Babel* continues in heterogeneous poetics. “In Six Ways Two Places at Once,” Schwartz returns to the necessarily protean aspect of individual or cultural identity against a program of violence: “Taught to fear/complexity,—to beware shifting, boundaries, the self insists on boundaries/ hard and fast./ Or so the moral community proposes/...Never assume there is one/ who can speak clearly into the contradictions/ of non-identity and loss/ or that such a person’s/ *knowledge of suffering*/ extends to his organization, or to us.” Again and again, it becomes clear, that the actors in state violence are emboldened by a sense of moral conviction, and a sense of technological certainty. This is the danger that arises from claiming understanding in the face of another’s alterity.

Schwartz takes an Oulipian turn in “Apple Anyone?” a bravura group of sonnets written with English words that have Arabic and Persian roots. “Here comes a tabby whose scratch will leave a lasting mark,/ or else a taffeta from a quarter of town recently hit by bombs,/ or all the cotton ever picked, the laborious wizard enslaved inside you./ Why is it my words always touch this one particular?/ As the sun is daily both bouncy and flat so we transact/ only what we can minaret, darting among damasked ruins.” The legacy of cosmopolitanism across the Mediterranean and Middle East has long been

celebrated. One thing this collection cities, is not only the productiveness of environments with many cultures exchanging information and affects, but also the delicacy of these environments. Trends towards cultural chauvinism have proved irresistible across many parts of the world in our contemporary order, resulting in a loss of complexity and heritage. These spaces and practices must be strategically preserved and promoted.

Schwartz traces certain scientific and philosophical concepts across through the history of Middle Eastern cultures overlapping. He writes, "The idea of the transcendental, which implies a detachment from the immediacy of the social, and the idea of the lyric, which implies an ecstatic upswell, still speak to us, it is because they allow us not a greater social mobility... but a mobility in the preconditions which make what is to follow possible—some kind of society... Let us resolve to think of transcendental mobility as a mobile. The poem as a mobile of words and signs, dangled over the crib of the culture, as to stimulate the mind to imagine new combinations."

## II. Conversation

Schwartz continues in indictments and conversation. The collection breathes out, allowing new voices to enter at the breaks. In an earlier interview with Fanny Howe, Schwartz outlined a tradition of conversation, mirroring Buber's thoughts on encounter. Paraphrasing an earlier guest, he introduces the Sufi's relation to conversation: "There are three modes of spiritual practice hierarchically arranged, with prayer as the lowest rung in which one liturgically speaks to the unknown in a prayerful mode; the second rung being meditation where one tries to empty the mind and hence allow "it" in; and the third and highest mode of spiritual practice being conversation in which the free play of speech conjures up this something which we cannot name."

I think it's accurate to describe Leonard Schwartz as a poet of the conversation. This work is immediately in conversation with several poets.

Aharon Shabtai shared several poems for the collection. Including a clear-eyed denunciation of the 2002 military violence against Palestinians in Jenin, "My lips mutter: Palestine! Do not die on me! My heart's with each syringe in your hand, Moustafa Barghouti!/ It's with the Muqata'a, with the roadside corpse that help couldn't reach—with the pencil on your table, Mahmoud Darwish./...Our country, a new birth is underway in Bethlehem—the bloody placenta will be tossed into a pail, and from the womb/ a creature is born of our people's love will burst forth into the blue. Listen, his heart is beating through mine—I'm a Palestinian Jew."

In a segment on the publisher of contemporary Palestinian poetics, *Ibis Editions*, Schwartz cites Emmanuel Levinas as establishing an ethics of encounter through language. By speaking and thinking, we're necessarily in concert with other individuals, even as this exchange cannot be simplified. Levinas insists the fundamental unknowability of other individuals. Krzysztof Ziarek describes this in *Inflected Language: Towards a Hermeneutics of Nearness*, "Since for Levinas the ability to relate, to form oppositions, is a

necessary characteristic of totalization, the non-totalizable other ruptures totality, albeit “silently,” and baffles the security of bipolar thinking.” We’re part of an experience in constant flux, necessarily irrational.

*The New Babel* is in conversation with many texts, Darwish’s *Memory For Forgetfulness*, Baraka’s *Somebody Blew Up America*. Another kindred project is Benjamin Hollander’s *Rituals of Truce*. This text, like Hollander’s seeks out a way of establishing new boundaries, reframing the real and allowing a break, from what Hollander identified as rituals. He wrote. “I’m not really interested in being stuck in a conversation/ argument with any people who have formed or been mired into ‘some sort of collective opinion about history’ in relation to the Middle East. Even the so-called ‘moderates’ among them make things happen in their heads—I mean they already have ‘essays in their heads’... before I’ve said a word—and, like Rufus T. Firefly, they imagine self-fulfilling ‘what if’ rituals of conflict out of desires for truce. They’re prepossessed with history and the claims of history, which make me ask the question: Who will they trust to tell them a different story?” Hollander’s piece is an important companion, because like *The New Babel*, it breaks down so many of the boundaries that have been drawn over the last fifty years of conflict. It challenges the essentialism of any nation and culture. It cites Levinas, “Inertia is the grand language of being...but a human being can surge above that and destroy it.” Hollander writes about all of the communities across the North American continent that were called Zion at the ostensible promise of another “land without a people.” And through these investigations he manages to disrupt some of the automatized, and ideologically reinforced clichés.

Israeli artist Yael Bartana engages in a similar kind of reframing when she proposes an imaginary “right to return” movement for Israelis based around Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Middle Europe, and the communities that founded the vast cosmopolitan centers of modernity at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century before the state sponsored murder of Jews changed our world forever. Bartana does this mock seriously, although the core critique is lasting against the parallel projects of mono-cultural states. The centers of Eastern Europe are greatly diminished, and projects of ethnic chauvinism over the last century have created culturally homogenous enclaves.

### III. Walls

The ongoing conflict in the Middle East, and the experience of apartheid in the Palestinian/Israeli conflict has long acted as a distillation of prevailing global violence. Trends today reveal this violence in broad strokes, from the dismantling of the vast camps of Calais, to the travel ban, to the unmanned strikes of Waziristan, to the Southern border of the U.S., and Schwartz writes: “To bring down the wall, bring down the walls, in favor of the greater city.” Schwartz evokes Celan, Levinas, Buber, describing an encounter between individual bodies that cannot know one another, but might somehow learn to live together. The collection itself breathes. He writes: “The smoke contains bodies; we breathe one another. Thus, Babel is Kabul. We breathe one another.”

*Babel of course is the fall of a Tower, followed by a vast, manipulated*

*confusion of words.*

Babel returns as one of the most foundational metaphors in modernity. When Derrida wrote about Babel, he described the impossible and disastrous fantasy of a unified language. In the parable, it's only by destroying the tower, casting the world into variance, that language, and thought prevails. Meaning comes through exchange. Rather than any system of essential signs, language emerges as a state of becoming. This is important, as the grammar of language applies to systems of cultural exchange, commerce, and, generally, information. As humans as individuals in concert, expressing compulsive drives across various registers, there can never really be a unified end. These systems trend towards excess. And the social prerogative lies in the promoting of more freedoms for bodies rather than fewer.

This is important to Schwartz as he applies the Babel metaphor to the modern nation state. He identifies the paradoxical triumph of the conservative opposition to a Palestinian state. As the forces that made a two-state solution impossible have laid the groundwork for a necessarily multi-ethnic Israel. Schwartz cites Buber as an early advocate for a single state solution in Israel, unpredicated on an eternal Jewish majority. In 1947, Buber wrote, "The foundations of this structure cannot be the traditional ones of majority and minority, but must be different. We do not mean just any bi-national state, but this particular one, with its particular conditions... a bi-national state which embodies in its basic principle...the indispensable postulate of the rescue of the Jewish people."

Schwartz is thorough and compassionate as he follows these themes across texts. And he crucially frames the experience of Israel as a metaphor for the general crisis of Global North and South in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Rigidity in the face of national identity creates a dangerous myth. Aharon Shabtai denounces the politics of apartheid in his interview with Schwartz. He says of the Palestinians, "They are what is called in Greek the *autochtones*. They lived here before us, and they gave this land the beauty of the villages...Here we live in Israel-Palestine, these two peoples. It is something integral. If they are going to be expelled from here, I will also be expelled... The poem came out in the beginning. In the beginning it was only occupation. Then the occupation settled into apartheid."

#### **IV. Breathturn**

In the face of state-sponsored violence, Schwartz repeatedly returns to the late poetics of Paul Celan. Celan survived the death camps, but did not forget them. In his later work, he rejects the aesthetics of traditional lyric, to try to find a lyric that catches more of the complexity and ambivalence of human experience. In many ways, wading into the murkiness, and the historicity of language, he demonstrates some of the pessimism that is championed by writers like Fred Moten. The artifacts and structures of our shared languages do not necessarily predicate more freedom. Pierre Joris, the translator of *Breathturn into Timestead*, identifies Celan's project in a 2015 interview, "Celan realized that he needed a new language, one in which, as he

put it, metaphors, images, tropes can be lead ad absurdum, while the language gets grayer, more object-related...more sober, more factual. It distrusts beauty. It tries to be truthful...The language wants to relocate, even it's musicality is such...that it has nothing in common with the 'euphony' which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors."

Breath, and the social implications of a language defined through exchange, becomes fundamental to this work. Schwartz identifies Celan's experience returning to Middle Europe and feeling himself breathing in the bodies of the murdered Jewish people. From this emphasis of communion, and consuming other bodies, to the materiality of information that is exchanged between bodies and accretes additional information, he develops a poetics. This is the poetics of the breathturn and the meridian.

For Celan, breathturn was the physiological experience of the breath creating breaks in conversation. But it also came to represent access points.

Through line breaks, he purposely breaks down the composite German words, even as he builds them up. In *Schaltjahrhunderte*,

LEAP-CENTURIES, leap-  
seconds, leap-  
births, novembering, leap-  
deaths...

.....  
(Unaslyumed, un-  
archived, un-  
welfare-attended? A-  
live?)

These formal interventions create the traditional avant-gardist break against language of the status quo. Celan's breaks play with the traditional reading and breathing of poetry, opening up an inquiry through formal experiment.

The notion of breaths beginning and ending has a certain choral effect. It also suggests multivocality, or at least problematizes the traditional subjects of address in poetry. The later Celan especially interrogated the ambiguity of pronouns, and the multiplicities that arise through ambivalent systems of representation. Joris calls this a dismantling and rewelding of language. Celan effectively breaks down the sense of subject:

SPRINKLE OCHRE into my eyes:  
no longer  
you live in them,

With their dream  
graze the debased coinage,  
the scale of  
my temporal bone

"Sprinkle Ochre," also illustrates the notion of meridian or breathwave. This is the thrust, or arc that an artifact takes when it enters into a system of

social exchange. A meridian emerges at every new encounter. In this way, it reflects Heraclitus and the swerve or the Clinamen, demonstrating the contingency of every encounter between individuals. It also shows some of the idealism of the Romantics, Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," in the way that these poetic artifacts effect their environments, creating the preconditions for a more ideal mode of being together. Both the Romantics and the Moderns looked at this tension, the notion of individuals moving through discontinuous space, bringing meaning, and narrative and coherence as a kind of thread. For Celan, the interchange of breaths and ideas, and the breathwaves that emerge, are necessarily social and constitutive. Information has a material aspect, with a specific historicity. And Celan shows it's possible to map some of this materiality, through the physical breathing in and out of language, as the language we breathe out is necessarily received, and immediately constituting a new vector.

Memorial in the face of violence, absurdism and fancy against technocracy; modernist poetics has always offered a space of intervention. Through his poetry, *Cross Cultural Poetics*, as well as his work as an editor of poetry in translation, Leonard Schwartz engages in an explicit project to deepen bonds across cultural difference, in the service of creating a society that allows these differences. The *New Babel* offers a brief and worthwhile glimpse into this expansive and generous project.