

on coverage of city government.

One reason is the suburbanization of America. To keep advertisers' dollars, newspapers must pursue affluent readers in the suburbs. "Write more about suburban lifestyles," advised a 1988 report on the future of the press by the American Society of Newspaper Editors, "and less about government meetings."

Big city dailies also face increasing competition from suburban newspapers and, especially, local TV news. But TV journalists do not elevate the quality of reporting, observes Ehrenhalt. Kevin O'Connor, recently elected Milwaukee county trea-

surer, says of his experience during the campaign: "If you could stage something with color, you could get covered."

The *Journal*, Ehrenhalt notes, no longer seeks to be the local "newspaper of record"; it has cut its City Hall staff. Common Council meetings are reported, but there is no "clear picture of how the institutions are working, who forms alliances with whom, and which members are responsible for which policies."

In Milwaukee and other big cities, that leaves local politicians in good position to manipulate the news, and local residents in increasing ignorance.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Misunderstanding Wittgenstein

"The Philosophical Porcupine" by Roger Kimball, in *The New Criterion* (Dec. 1988), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) was one of the most influential philosophers of the 20th century. Ironically, says Kimball, a literary critic, this man who "detested the academy" unintentionally fathered today's school of highly abstract Anglo-American academic philosophy.

Wittgenstein was the youngest of eight children born to "the Carnegie of Austria," whose opulent Vienna household bubbled with talent and torments. Three of Wittgenstein's four brothers committed suicide; the fourth, Paul, who lost an arm in World War I, nevertheless enjoyed a successful career as a concert pianist.

In 1911, young Ludwig went to Cambridge to study philosophy with Bertrand Russell, who described him as "perhaps the most perfect example I have known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense, and dominating." (And, Russell might have added, *angst*-ridden.) Before long, Russell was "dutifully taking down the reflections on logic that Wittgenstein [17 years his junior] dictated as he paced the room nervously." Wittgenstein's brilliant critiques of his work soon convinced Russell "that I could not hope

ever again to do fundamental work in philosophy."

After serving with distinction in the Austrian army during World War I, Wittgenstein renounced his inherited fortune and held a variety of non-academic jobs—schoolteacher, gardener, architect—before returning to Cambridge in 1929.

For all of his profound impact, Wittgenstein published only one slim volume, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), plus the posthumous *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), a children's textbook, an essay, and a book review. Too impatient to present detailed arguments, Wittgenstein wrote in a seemingly disjointed, epigrammatic style: "The world is the totality of facts, not things."

Wittgenstein hoped to construct "an ideal language in which all true propositions can be clearly expressed," thus uncovering the propositions still in need of investigation. As early as the *Tractatus*, Kimball argues, Wittgenstein came to see conventional philosophy (including his own) as a ladder that must be climbed and then discarded, as he put it, to "see the world aright." Wittgenstein sought to re-

turn philosophy to what he considered “the important questions of everyday life,” says Kimball. Although he prized clarity of

language, he was somehow gravely misunderstood on this point by his academic successors.

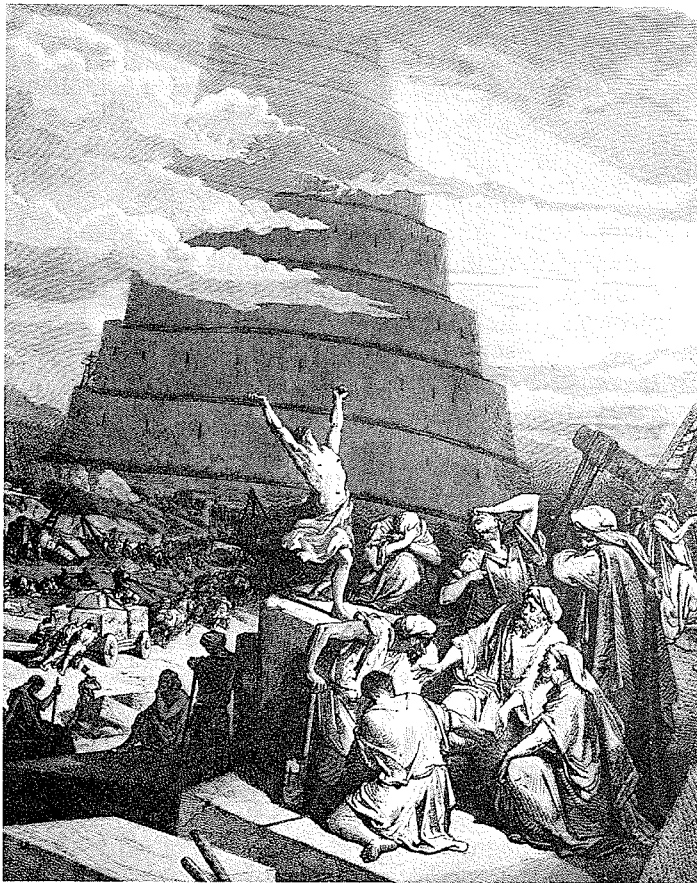
Babel

“What’s Wrong With Babel?” by Leon R. Kass, in *The American Scholar* (Winter 1989), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

“Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the earth.’”

Thus did the biblical people of Babel plant the seeds of their own destruction, recalls Kass, who teaches at the University of Chicago. What was their sin?

The story of Babel, he notes, is one of a series of tales in Genesis—Eden, Cain and Abel, the Flood—in which man is told of human possibilities that have been tried and have proved impossible. The still-valid lesson from Babel, Kass believes, is that the “recurrent dream of universal human community living in peace and freedom” is a delusion.



Reaching towards heaven, the Tower of Babel, as depicted in 1866 by Gustave Doré, symbolized man's quest for omnipotence. In the Bible, God destroyed the tower before it was completed.

At the time of Babel’s creation, the “whole earth was of one language and one speech,” the Bible says, suggesting a shared human understanding of the world. The creation of the orderly city “proudly celebrates the powers of human reason” and the human quest for self-sufficiency. The tower “is a human effort to link up heaven and earth,” and, in a sense, to control heaven and human destiny, says Kass. “In Babel, the universal city, with its own uniform language, beliefs, truths, customs, and laws, [men] neither know nor seek to know anything beyond.”

God punished the people of Babel for their implied wish to be as gods by confounding their language and scattering them “upon the face of all the earth.” The result, Kass observes, was “the emergence of separate nations, with separate tongues and separate ways, with the near-certain prospect of difference” and war.