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## “This Departure From the True Nature of the Words”: Matsell’s Attempt to Un-Babelize New York

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“You who read me—are you certain you understand my language?”  
Jorge Luis Borges, “The Library of Babel”

In the cacophony of rapid population growth and without an established police force, nineteenth-century New York was babelizing. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “babelize” as follows: “to make a babel of, to bring to confusion.” But, in an example of usage from the nineteenth century itself, the “confusion” comes into linguistic focus: “to putrefy the language into several thieves’ lingoes, to babelize literally.” This linguistic fragmentation underlines the ideological impetus of George W. Matsell’s *Vocabulum; or, The Rogue’s Lexicon*, a collection of terms promoted as a Rosetta stone capable of deciphering criminal cant. Claiming to have

singlehandedly cracked the criminal code through extensive field research, Matsell posits that the criminal element was linked by a “peculiar language” the world over (*Vocabulum* iv); the *Lexicon* claims to have deciphered this language, a reconstruction of the Tower of Babel.

In the time leading up to the publication in 1859 of Matsell’s *Vocabulum*, New York was “growing even more rapidly than London” (Coleman 90) and was becoming filled with “extensive slums” (90). These densely populated and under-policed areas provided criminals with a refuge in which they could operate in anonymity. The massive influx of immigrants, coupled with the fact that New York was “in the process of establishing a professional police force” (90), made for a chaotic period that demanded organized and decisive governance. Serving as the first Chief of Municipal Police from 1845, Matsell wrote his lexicon as a rhetorical strategy highlighting the efficacy of his force. Cast as an “invaluable” (*Vocabulum* vi) resource for officers, the *Vocabulum* claimed to offer the return to order that New York so desperately needed. Considering that there were two rival police forces operating simultaneously, Matsell’s strategy seems to be an exercise in legitimization, as his force was abolished in 1857, when the state-run Metropolitan Police was officially instated.<sup>1</sup> Matsell’s lexicon came out during a period in which his position had lost its official status; by claiming that he had singlehandedly penetrated the criminal mind through keen observation he tried to give lustre to his reputation and retrospective credibility to a force that had been rejected by the state whose major city he once policed. This paper explores how Matsell’s work is politically invested and relies on the manipulation of various concealed sources to simplify criminality into

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<sup>1</sup> As Augustine E. Costello notes, “From 1845 to 1853 the Board of Aldermen had the appointment of the Patrolmen on the force, but it being impossible to discipline the force under such circumstances, the legislature interfered, and designated the Mayor, Recorder and City Judge as a commission. In 1857 the State legislature passed what is known as the Metropolitan Police Act” (*Protectors* 101).

a workable and policeable element. Matsell claimed to have translated the language of a class of people; by exploring examples of nineteenth-century literary constructions of the city and their allusions to Babel I outline how these literary works view civil disorder and incommunicability as inseparable. By analyzing Jacques Derrida's work on Babelization and the inefficacy of translation, I offer a theoretical framework that undermines Matsell's criminal lexicon. The juxtaposition of nineteenth-century literary allusion and Derrida's meditations on the nature of language allows me to underline Matsell's exploitation of the connection between civil order and a harmonious language; the Derridean examinations of language expose the insufficiency of any translation and point toward politically ulterior motivations behind Matsell's criminal lexicon.

#### A TRANSLATION OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Crime was rampant in Matsell's overpopulated New York, as shown by Augustine Costello in *Our Police Protectors*: "The city had become greatly demoralized. During the civil strife of the Police, the repression of crime had been neglected. Gangs of rowdies had organized whose purposes were disorder and plunder" (101). The Police force was in disarray and unequipped to combat the rapid increase in population: "With a population of eight hundred and twenty thousand, and rapidly increasing," Costello writes, "the force numbered but one hundred and fifty seven more than when the population was three hundred and fifty thousand" (144). To contain the rapid modernization of the city, Matsell deployed a rhetorical strategy that relied on a Biblical motif. *Genesis* equates peacefulness with a single language understood by all, as in the beginning "the whole earth was of one language, and of one speech" (*Genesis* 11:1). With the eradication of univocal speech came the end of tranquility, God's punishment of humanity for its hubris. "And there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech"

(*Genesis* 11:7), spoke the Lord, thrusting confusion upon the world and thereby precipitating the fall of the hubristic Tower of Babel. As such, the Biblical image is synonymous with divine retribution and human chaos, a babble of tongues supplanting the *original* language that was the *original* word of God. Matsell's reactionary measures are allegorically linked to this mythic defamiliarization of language. Matsell's *Vocabulum* linked the criminal element through a common language, a cant composed of ancient terminologies, dead languages, and a vast array of slang terms supposedly fabricated by criminals to conceal their misdeeds from the authorities. In an effort to restore order, his compilation of the *Vocabulum* visibly reversed the toppling: ostensibly collecting the scattered rubble of a mysterious criminal language, the *Lexicon* aimed to restore civility by eliminating linguistic confusion, eliminating language barriers between the law-abiding and the law-breaking citizens. Criminals could communicate in secret through their cryptic diction; Matsell claimed to have rendered their cant transparent, shedding light on the shadow of corruption.

“Therefore is the name of it called Babel: because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth” (*Genesis* 11:9): by tracing the threads of the Biblical allegory, one may illuminate Matsell's audacity. Matsell presumed to reverse the fragmentation of language and thereby to restore order, even as he claimed that the criminal language itself was a culmination of immigrant dialects: “It is a language of great antiquity, and may be dated back to the earliest days of the roving gipsy bands that infested Europe, from whom the greater portion of it has been derived” (Matsell v). In his eyes, New York had become the locus of the international criminal element. But his *Vocabulum* does not claim to return a discordant city to some former unity; rather, it serves to polarize its citizens. Those who engage in illicit behavior necessarily converse

in cant; those who remain within the confines of the law speak a standard American English. In “What is a ‘Relevant’ Translation?” Jacques Derrida begins with a self-condemning question:

How dare one speak of translation before you who, in your vigilant awareness of the immense stakes – and not only of the fate of literature – make this sublime and impossible task your desire, your anxiety, your travail, your knowledge, and your knowing skill?

([2001] 174)

In his engagement with the Babel allegory, “Des tours de Babel,” Jacques Derrida problematizes the concept of constructing a language purely based on translation. Matsell positions himself at the origin, as having direct access to pure signification within a foreign tongue: “In giving his name, in giving all names, the father would be at the origin of language, and that power would belong by right to God the father. And the name of God the father would be the name of the origin of tongues” ([2007] 193). First, Matsell’s proposition represents cant as a pure and monolithic entity, a language used consistently by its users the world over. Secondly, he claims to have reformulated it into a clearly visible standard American English equivalent. The transference of meaning here not only claims to have translated a perplexing patois designed to elude police detection, but also forcefully positions the criminal element as a foreign and separate entity that operates outside of the linguistic confines of legitimate society. The *Vocabulum* is thus a rhetorical artifact more than an anthropological effort to understand a sect that operates within civil structure. It is a fear tactic, politically motivated—braggadocio on the part of a man vying for legitimization in a city so recently torn between two competing police forces.

Derrida elaborates on the audacity of pure translation claims, and asserts that any language is structural, or more appropriately, *structured*. Language, for Derrida, relies on inconsistency and multiplicity for the transmission of meaning:

The ‘tower of Babel’ does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system, and architectonics. (191)

Derrida posits that language itself, represented here by the unfinished tower of Babel, is necessarily beyond reduction, that it is an “irreducible multiplicity” that allows only for the momentary gesture toward meaning. The incompleteness is the virtue of language that points toward that which cannot be expressed—the end of language, and simultaneously, the end of meaning. With the *Vocabulum*, paraded as a daguerrotype of a criminal Esperanto, Matsell claims to have completed the structure, totalizing it within a dictionary. It is more apt to say that Matsell was the origin of a fallacious tongue, the *Lexicon* being the product of his own malfeasance: a babelization of legitimate linguistic observations reconfigured into the appearance of a total structure.

To translate meaning within a single language is to paraphrase; to claim that a language has been exhaustively surveyed and appropriated is deliberately reductive. As Matsell states in his introduction to the *Lexicon*, he has “arrived at as high a degree of perfection as is now attainable” (Matsell vi), a bold assertion that the continuation of his efforts—albeit “no mean undertaking” (iv)—will eventually arrive at a totalizing linguistic construction that exposes the true nature of criminal motive and behavior. As Derrida notes, compiling lexical data

comments, explains, paraphrases, but does not translate. At best it sketches an analysis by dividing the equivocation into two words at the point where confusion was gathered in potential, in all its potential, in the internal translation, if one can say that, that is at work on the word in the so-called original tongue. (Derrida [2007] 197)

Matsell's seemingly objective and empirical compilations are calculated to demonize the canters: the lion's share of the entries relate to criminal activity and financial and salacious concerns. Ignoring his own assertion that many of these words had bled into the *decent* public sphere ("It is not unusual to see them in the messages of presidents and governors" (Matsell v)), the language alone could not circumscribe a class of person; his efforts merely misconstrue various existing slang dictionaries in an effort to typify criminality. Compilers of the slang dictionaries assume that his own tongue is original and pure, untinged by criminal leanings, and then he further confuses the criminal cant expressions by appealing to them in standard American English, grafting his own bias into the various 'definitions'. Although the *Lexicon* claims to be the product of a "personal study among first-class thieves" (Matsell vi), according to Julie Coleman more than "two-thirds [of the entries] had been listed in earlier dictionaries" (Coleman 92), although Matsell often "abbreviated [the original definitions] beyond recognition" (92). In her exploration of the evolution of slang dictionaries, Coleman asserts that Matsell mined existing dictionaries for specific criminally tinged terminologies: "by selecting terms according to meaning [...] Mastell shaped his sources into what appears to be a more focused glossary of criminal language and interests" (96). The *Vocabulum* is a politically invested fabrication that claims to be empirical and neutral.

## A CACOPHONOUS LITERATURE REVIEW

Matsell's efforts originate from the ideological position that civil disorder is somehow linked to a loss of univocal language. His beliefs, however specious, were widely shared: writing by Matsell's contemporaries echoes the Babel trope, and compares moral decline to the Biblical allegory. In *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis describes the din of the city streets as follows: "Pushing, struggling, babbling, and shouting in foreign tongues, a veritable Babel of confusion. An English word falls upon the ear almost with a sense of shock, as something unexpected and strange" (70). In describing the "endless panorama of the tenements," Riis evokes the Biblical tower: having already linked poverty and criminal behavior, he furthermore insinuates that the largest portion of the criminal poor is of foreign origin. Blaming immigrant intrusion into the city and its consequent overpopulation, Riis discovers a Matsellian source of criminal education for the New York tough—flash:

his inordinate vanity makes him forget all fear or caution in the desire to distinguish himself before his fellows, a result of his swallowing all the flash literature and penny-dreadfuls he can beg, borrow, or steal—and there is never any lack of them—and of the strongly dramatic element in his nature that is nursed by such a diet into rank and morbid growth. He is a queer bundle of contradictions at all times. (126)

Riis elaborates on the language binary that underlines the perception of the criminal element: it is not only primarily foreign and unintelligible ("an English word falls upon the ear almost with a sense of shock"), but is further complicated by the inclusion of cant, or what Matsell refers to as "a language peculiarly [the rogue's] own, which is understood and spoken by them no matter what their dialect" (Matsell iii). This manipulation of words is purported to inculcate criminal

attitudes in the young, nurturing nascent evil desires that are laid out in detail within the pages of sensationalized criminal literature. Aside from the fact that Matsell himself published and pushed such tabloid flash—he published the *National Police Gazette*, “a tabloid newspaper” (*History* 90)—the concept of a single language begins to collapse: how is it that all of these impoverished young rogues are literate and that these penny-dreadfuls are accessible to all immigrant divisions within the criminal world in spite of their linguistic differences?

In *Letters from New York*, Lydia Maria Child reiterates the Biblical allusion as she refers to the city as “this great Babel of misery and crime” (Child 94), and continues with a linguistically tinged metaphorical elaboration of her desire for humanity to aspire to divine benevolence. Unlike Riis, Child does not couple malevolence with a foreign tongue; instead she characterizes all language as a departure from the original words of God. Here, language expresses human confusion, and her desire for clarity simply echoes her demand for compassion, as she implores her readers to “be true to the world. Benevolence, like music, is a universal language. It cannot freely utter itself in dialects” (81). The “universal language” is no longer misappropriated as a reductive methodology for class demarcation among the criminal element. Instead, the only truly universal language is benevolence. Through Child’s lens, mankind’s Babelization occurs when language is misused to obscure the Christian charity. “Not against any form, or phrase, do I enter a protest; but only against its unmeaning use... ‘The man who claims to speak as books enable, as synods use, as fashion guides, or as interest commands, babbles. Let him hush’” (80): “to speak ... as interest commands” aptly describes Matsell’s construction of an “authoritative” lexicon by obscuring his sources and altering definitions to demonize a class of people. As Child seems to suggest, the babble at hand in the *Vocabulum* is strictly Matsell’s, and not that of some foreign, parasitic element. Child’s concept of a return to order among the

languages is a metaphorical demand for harmony among seemingly discordant social behaviors and an eradication of the many injustices she encounters in her travels around the city. She warns of the dangerous potential of language, its nefarious design and duplicitous nature:

Politeness is but a parrot mockery of her heavenly tones, which the world lisps and stammers, to imitate, as best she can, the pure language known to us only in beautiful fragments. Not through copy shall the fair original ever be restored. (80)

As she suggests, all language vainly attempts to access pure conceptual meaning, here related to the divine presence of God. In repeating and reconstructing carefully collected words and coupling them with specious definitions, Matsell creates deception: a copy through which no original can be restored as it never truly existed. In his efforts to interpret others (whom he perceives to be of a lower social caste), Matsell becomes what Child refers to as a self-listening man, one who ignores the reality of his surroundings in a selfish effort to reconstruct the world in his own, self-serving image. Child demands that all look beyond the babble of man, “as reason and understanding lie beyond the access of human language. They are the hieroglyphics of angels, loved by all men for the beauty of their character, though few can decypher even fragments of their meaning” (167). Child removes “reason and understanding” from the grasp of human language, responding to the Derridean assertion that pure meaning can never be attained through a language manufactured by human minds.

Herman Melville’s *Pierre* showcases a much less hopeful view of city life: Pierre’s transition into the city exposes a babel of moral degradation that ultimately contributes to the debasement of his own character and culminates in his eventual suicide. The novel deploys the Babel allusion when Pierre enters the police watch-house. A tower visible from the city streets,

the watch-house is a symbol of order, both containing the criminal element and representing the omniscient gaze of police protection. But “entering the watch-house fill[s] [Pierre] with inexpressible horror and fury” (Melville 240), not the reassurance that the tower implies. “On all sides were heard drunken male and female voices, in English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese, interlarded now and then, with the foulest of all human lingoes, that dialect of sin and death, known as the Cant language, or Flash” (240): the watch-house that seemingly promises unity instead conceals its own internal babel. The violent sound from within the tower is described as a grotesque amalgamation of languages and dialects, the worst of all being the duplicitous Cant of thieves. The passage operates on two symbolic levels: as a symbol of unification and police presence, the watch-house obfuscates the general disarray of the city streets; echoing Matsell, the babelization of language within the watch-house is a sign of the illicit behavior there (especially given the evocation of the secret dialect of Flash). Ironically, the police concentrate this linguistic confusion in a place identified with their own authority. Language becomes the fulcrum on which order and disorder tilt. Civil disorder is again linked to the absence of pure meaning. Thus, the prison becomes “this combined babel of persons and voices” (240), an original language mutilated by immoral behavior. Furthermore, Melville’s reference to “words and phrases unrepeatable in God’s sunlight” (240) is the novel’s only elaboration on the linguistic content, harkening back to Child’s idea of an original and divine language obscured by mankind’s deplorable behavior. Melville’s metaphor facilitates Matsell’s propaganda—the purported connection between language dissimulation and civic disarray. The degradation of language is coupled with a degradation of moral character.

## THE IRREDUCIBLE DIFFICULTY OF TRANSLATION

Derrida's explication of the misuse of the Babel symbol and his remarks on the inadequacy of translation underline the need for a hypothetical linguistic configuration:

Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, of one place in the encyclopedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, [Babel] also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. (Derrida [2007] 191)

Faced with an influx of immigrants, New York was in the midst of overpopulation, and a subsequent insurgence of crime seemingly uncontrollable by legal efforts. Matsell boasted that he discovered, through scrupulous research, a way not only to determine if one was a criminal, but also to comprehend criminal behavior. Derrida's "Des tours de Babel" emphasizes that we depend on inadequate terms in order to structure language and to make it easily understandable, since the infinite multiplicity of meaning denies a totalizing language; Matsell, on the other hand, totalizes a language by relating it to specific human character. He suggests that immoral behavior is accompanied by a singular yet duplicitous cant that transcends the limitations of all other human languages, somehow crossing geographic borders and achieving what all other linguistic efforts have failed to do: remain static and transparent. Derrida warns against this with the caveat that "one should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised and into which a discourse on translation is translated" (Derrida 192). In describing the difficulties confronting earlier American policemen as they tried to collect and use the cant language, Matsell betrays the shortcomings of his own task: "there being no standard they [have been] unable to do so understandingly and each one [has given] to the words the

corrupted sense in which he received it" (Matsell vi). Matsell's description of vain efforts to collect and render comprehensible the thieves' dialect is closely aligned with the Derridean explanation of language, in that all efforts to elucidate meaning of words through other words necessarily corrupt and further complicate any original efforts to access pure and intended meaning. The language characterized by Matsell as a complete document of a global criminal culture must be static and transparent in order to facilitate the construction of his lexicon. Ironically, such cant is implicitly intended to deceive, and is therefore opposed to the elaborative intent of expressive language. Not only does Matsell claim to have documented a language *in toto*, he claims to have captured its meaning, and furthermore, reconfigured it to make it accessible *in another language*.

The three literary texts discussed above share the desire for linguistic transparency and link linguistic opaqueness to urban experience. Matsell expresses a desire to return order to a chaotic city by translating its criminal jargon. But Matsell differentiates between common linguistic usage and the bastardized language that belongs to the unlawful citizen: his is not a desire to unite, but to demarcate the problematic element by their misuse of language, heavily influenced by the recurring association between crime and the city's growing immigrant population. Immigrants arrive with a different dialect and language by virtue of their foreign origin. What complicates Matsell's claims is the manner in which he arrived at his lexical assertion. As documented in Coleman's *History of Cant and Slang Languages*, the majority of his terminologies were directly lifted from other sources, primarily the *Lexicon Balatronicum*:

Assuming that the *Lexicon* was the main source, Matsell adopted considerably more terms for crime & dishonesty, law & order, body & health, and artefacts and money than we would expect from a

random sample. . . . By selecting terms according to meaning from the *Lexicon*, Matsell shaped his sources into what appears to be a more focused glossary of criminal language and interests. (Coleman 96)

Matsell's entries can be traced back to other slang dictionaries, a circumstance that explodes his claim to have undertaken extensive field work. Furthermore, his obfuscation of the original dictionary entries not only shows a desire to conceal his source material but also complicates the project's intent: to serve as a complete and transparent guide for New York citizens to aid in detecting and avoiding criminals. Instead of achieving the tranquil univocity evoked in the image of the Babel tower before its fall, Matsell has further babelized existing babelizations, creating a false language from the fragments of other fragmented slang utterances. In the instances where Matsell's entries appear to be original and untraceable to a prior source, they are often coupled with a verbose anecdote that places the particular example in the realm of irreproducible specificity, as shown in the entry for "Confidence Man": ". . . he wakes up out of his 'brown study,' and finds himself, in lieu of his fine expectations, in possession of a turnip for a watch, a cigar box in place of a casket" (Matsell 21).

But this is not to say that cant did not exist in the streets of New York. William Cumming Wilde's "Notes on Thief Talk" offers a telling example of Matsell's *Vocabulum* as it functioned in New York streets. "Sitting with one of the most desperate characters that our city has produced," notes Wilde in describing an encounter with a known felon, he happens upon a copy of the *Rogue's Lexicon*. When Wilde asks if "these words [are] actually used in conversation of thieves," his interlocutor, "one of the most desperate characters that our city has produced" assures him that they are ([1890] 303). The fact that flash was in use among thieves is

undeniable, but Matsell's framing of it as a single, self-sufficient language is the source of the problem. As Coleman notes, "Slang is usually short-lived, and often belongs to a specific age group or social clique" (Coleman 1); just as a language evolves, so does deceptive jargon. In introducing her study of the many cant dictionaries, Coleman emphasizes that "the boundaries between these types of language cannot be clearly defined, and individual terms move easily between categories as they are adopted by new sets of speakers" (2). Even Matsell admits to this overlap of language, as he states that even "the elite of the Fifth Avenue pay homage to [cant words'] worth by frequently using them to express thoughts" (Matsell v), though he tries his best to cover up this linkage between cant and the elite of society.

In another article on cant language, Wilde remarks that "Thieving without secrecy could hardly exist. Thief talk was invented to secure this" ([1889] 301). As its intention is to obscure the truth from potential witnesses, "changes in its words are frequently made" (301). Wilde's explanation of the lithe nature of the dialect defies Matsell's claim to have captured a static criminal language. To presume that any documentation of a language is sufficient is to ignore the manner in which language itself operates and evolves, a fact outlined by Wilde:

This is the history of all tongues; the more degraded does not often appropriate the language of the more cultivated, while the latter borrows from the former without stint or measure; and our English is no exception to the rule. Indeed, much of our existing slang was once Cant, and one is oftentimes puzzled to distinguish the one from the other. . . . (303)

Language evolves through usage; it is active and resists permanent confinement in documentation. Considering the purpose of cant, a language designed to manipulate perceptions

must continually evolve in order to maintain its efficacy as deception. This fact, coupled with Matsell's plagiarism of the *Lexicon Balatronicum*, indicates an artifact both falsified and fallacious. More than documenting any secret language, the *Vocabulum* attempts to attach a system of pure linguistic signification to a particular social class in an effort to polarize the city between its good and bad citizens. The *Vocabulum* symbolically functions as a Tower of Babel, one reconstructed to obtain leverage in a battle between rival police forces in a city undergoing massive social unrest. By singularizing the criminal element via language, Matsell makes visible the hidden world of crime by oversimplifying criminal slang. In this reductionist manner, Matsell declared criminality translatable.

#### AS SOON AS THERE IS LANGUAGE, GENERALITY HAS ENTERED THE SCENE...

In Derrida's disintegration of the concept of pure translation, the Babel myth takes on further significance:

Translation becomes the law, duty, and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. Such insolvency is found marked in the very name of Babel, which at once translates and does not translate itself, belongs without belonging to a language and indebts itself to itself for an insolvent debt, to itself as other. Such would be the Babelian performance. (Derrida 199)

Cant is born of all other languages: it borrows, modifies, and obscures recognizable words from various sources in order to disguise criminal activity. But all language follows a similar trajectory, as it is continually modified within various discrete groups. Furthermore, language evolves with time, as meanings are modified and appropriated as words are handed down from

generation to generation. Language is continually manipulated to obtain relevant and meaningful expression. *Genesis* describes society prior to the fall of the tower as harmonious in terms of mutual intelligibility of language: “the people is one, and they have all one language” (*Genesis* 11:6). But this one language is the very word of God, provided by him and taken away by him. To insinuate that one has access to such a language, to such singular presence of meaning, is to usurp the authority of God, to be at once of the linguistic structure and yet beyond it, capable of translating it entirely and monitoring its innumerable shifts. To compile a lexicon is to attempt to delineate a specific temporal occurrence of a necessarily evolving language. To claim to capture a global language is to play the impossible role of linguistic god—a critique of all dictionary projects that is particularly fitting for *Vocabulum*.

The recurring image of the Tower of Babel in nineteenth-century American literature and its ideological reflection in the desire for linguistic singularity in Matsell’s *Vocabulum* illustrate an underlying desire not only to transcend the general chaos present in a burgeoning metropolis but also to link the chaotic criminal element to a confused and foreign tongue. Matsell’s efforts represent an attempt to distance the general population from the common criminal via language, an obvious indication of social difference and cultural origin. Like all dictionaries or lexicons, Matsell’s *Vocabulum* not only collects terms and translations but also designs a people: in this particular instance, a design that aimed to debase and unify the element of illegal activity the world over. The fact that his sources were borrowed and travestied and that no legitimate research went into the construction of this catalogue reveals the desire to distance the criminal from the common citizen and simultaneously to blame unlawful occurrences on a foreign, specifically un-American group. *Vocabulum* unifies the illusory enemy and creates a globe-spanning “other,” one for the common law-abiding citizen to fear and avoid. In fact, the content

of the *Lexicon* is irrelevant: the simple production of such a collection insinuates that the police in charge of civil order is capable of penetrating a global, organized force of criminal activity, deciphering their attempts to hide by distributing their words, practices, appearances, and mannerisms to all. The book itself symbolically becomes a Babelian reconstruction without having to live up to its claims. Its use ultimately led to disillusionment among officers and citizens alike, but for a period of time in the mid to late 1800s, the *Vocabulum* stood as proof that criminality was a trait of a community, and the law was more than capable of rendering it manageable. More than mutual understanding and harmonious existence, Babel symbolizes the desire to transcend and control human interaction: Matsell's Babelian offering to the people of New York serves as an attempt to condense human interaction and the nebulous organism that is language.

Cant is defined as a language peculiar to a specified group or profession that is often regarded with disparagement. Tinged with insincerity, it is linked to a class, a segregated section of social discourse. It is the private language of the underworld: circuitous and hypocritical, it describes a language skillfully constructed to elude detection or to confuse eavesdroppers. It is derived from the Latin *cantare*: translated, “to speak.” And notably, the cant language evolved in its various forms not unlike other more “respectable” languages. But *cantare* also means to sing, like the idyllic vision of city-wide vocal harmony that Child spoke of in her letters—harmony that the listening soul can perceive above the din of the tumultuous world. Matsell claimed to have been one such soul—or, more appropriately, the soul that categorized the din itself and thereby filtered discordant elements of the metropolitan choir. But the *Vocabulum* itself defines cant as “a gift, to give”: the specious gift that Matsell gave New York, more akin to a trojan offering; a hobbyhorse on which Matsell hung his myopic perception of society along with his

many prejudices. More than just defining their words, Matsell defined a group of people by attaching his vision of corrupt human behavior to a purportedly credible collection of lexical terms.<sup>122</sup>

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