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A STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION IN DARK ACADEMIA

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ABSTRACT

In the Dark Academia genre, novels place a profound emphasis on the role of language, literary culture, translation, and interpretation. These elements are not merely considered as aspects of the academic sphere, but as significant tools in understanding the genre's deeper context and meaning. The present study aims to examine this particular role of written communication and translation in Dark Academia, exploring the hidden details and layers of meaning in the text. The article investigates how languages shape both collective and individual identities, while influencing the foreshadowing elements of the genre, as well as the characters' perspectives, choices, and sense of self. The primary objective of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of selected Dark Academia novels, including Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution by R. F. Kuang, which emphasises the idea that "An act of translation is always an act of betrayal," thereby foreboding the complex interplay between linguistics, translation, culture, and social and power dynamics.

KEYWORDS

Dark Academia, Babel, The Secret History, If We Were Villains, translation studies, literary culture, historical fiction, identity

INTRODUCTION

"For someone who loved words as much as I did, it was amazing how often they failed me." (Rio, 2017, p. 253)

In recent years, the cultural phenomenon of Dark Academia has attracted increasing attention and prominence in both the digital sphere, particularly on social media platforms such as Instagram, Tumblr and TikTok, and within literary circles. The phenomenon can be defined as a subculture centred on the nostalgic longing for academic endeavours, including both its aesthetic and higher, philosophical and intellectual quality. Deeply characterised by its appreciation for the classics, academic pursuits, and Gothic aestheticism, Dark Academia offers a unique milieu where interactions are frequently influenced by scholarly values and literary culture. There is a profound emphasis on the significance of philosophical discourse, interpretation, intertextuality, and translation in the genre, illuminating the engagement with higher education where the role of language is of utmost importance. It is therefore evident that the language employed in the Dark Academia genre and the linguistic features it exhibits echo

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its underlying aesthetic principles: the visuals of dreaming spires and ivy-clad halls where whispers dwell, where leaves fall sharp on cobbled stone; stories all about tragedies worn like art, bound by ancient spells; hidden, old manuscripts, alive with ghosts not quite themselves. This exaggerated style of description in Dark Academia draws inspiration from classical literature and the intellectual tradition, most particularly in the domains of poetry and philosophy, and consequently its language is a clear reflection of this[24]. For instance, in aesthetic terms, consider the following description by Tumblr user *@aircademia*, who characterises the atmosphere of 'modern dark academia' as follows:

"stacks of printed class handouts piled on the desk, messy and disorganised to all but the one they belong to; textbooks with notes and observations scribbled hastily in the margin in black biro, important passages circled and underlined with feverish vigour; (…) the harsh fluorescent lights of a university corridor late at night, a single set of footsteps cutting through the silence".[25]

The overall message is conveyed through the depiction of an ordinary, mundane academic experience as almost tangible and whimsical. Similarly, within the Dark Academia genre itself, authors frequently employ a lyrical tone and formal style that has the effect of sounding practically antiquated and archaic, mimicking prose that feels elegant in quality, but is stained with moroseness, a concept resulting from the inspiration of the Gothic-Romanticism tradition (see for example Adriaansen, 2022, pp. 109-111; Lee, 2024, pp. 422-423). To provide an illustration, examples can be drawn from prominent representatives of the genre, such as Donna Tartt's seminal work *The Secret History* (1992), which contains one of the most frequently quoted lines from her book: "Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it" (Tartt, 1993, p. 44) and "I am nothing in my soul if not obsessive" (Tartt, 1993, p. 30). A further example can be found in M. L. Rio's *If We Were Villains* (2017), a novel rich with elegiac exclamations such as, "You can justify anything if you do it poetically enough" (Rio, 2017, p. 298) or "Which of us could say we were more sinned against than sinning? We were so easily manipulated—confusion made a masterpiece of us" (Rio, 2017, p. 418). R. F. Kuang's 2022 release, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* captures the essence of Dark Academia by intertwining the themes of speech and meaning, evoking a sense of beauty and the subtle element of terror: "But the answer was obvious – that they were all four of them drowning in the unfamiliar, and they saw in each other a raft, and clinging to one another was the only way to stay afloat" (Kuang, 2023, p. 90) and "That's the beauty of learning a new language. It should feel like an enormous undertaking. It ought to intimidate you" (Kuang, 2023, p. 28).

Nevertheless, within contemporary discourse, this particular attribute of the Dark Academia phenomenon appears to be of significance with regard to works published in this literary category, prompting the question of how important the role of language, academic jargon and literary culture should be in Dark Academia texts. A large number of recently published literary works are being advertised as Dark Academia books simply for including tropes such as an academic setting or a subplot involving academic rivalry. However, books written by academics about the academic in a style that leans into that of fantasy academia have been the subject of

[24] Oxford is known as the "city of dreaming spires," a term coined by the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold in his poem "Thyrsis." For more information, see: Shrimpton, N. (2023, August 23). Dreaming spires? Arnold's Oxford. *The New Criterion*. Newcriterion.com. Available at https://newcriterion.com/article/dreaming-spires-arnolds-oxford/

[25] @aircademia, "modern dark academia," posted on September 15, 2019. Available at https://aircademia.tumblr.com/post/187737642148/modern-dark-academia

criticism for sounding too pretentious or too difficult to read, too textbook-like, as these works demand engagement with the authentic qualities of academia, rather than merely the idealised aesthetic. M. L. Rio, author of one of the most prominent works in the genre, has asserted that "All academia is dark academia"[26] as a reaction to this particular literary label. She claims that

> "It was the 'dark' modifier I disliked. Not because what I'd written wasn't dark, but because darkness is so intrinsic to academic life that it struck me as unforgivably redundant. (...) many readers—especially the ones who are youngest, who don't yet have the critical reading skills to read between the lines because they haven't yet done their time in higher education—miss the point completely. They're swept up in the 'aesthetic,' the 'vibes,' the flatlays and outfits-of-the-day, the fantasy of belonging to an exclusive society of the intellectually anointed".[27]

A recent example of this polarising anomaly is *Katabasis* (2025), a highly anticipated new release by R. F. Kuang, the author of the critically acclaimed novel *Babel*.[28] While *Katabasis* was highlighted as the next Dark Academia book from the beginning, it received a mixed reception, with some readers and reviewers critiquing the number of references that readers allegedly must be familiar with in order to understand the clues and happenings within the story, while others praised the complexity of the narrative (see for example Gaunt, *The Spectator*, 2025; Kearse, *The Washington Post*, 2025; Kurian, *The Nod Mag*, 2025; White, *The New York Times*, 2025). This is somewhat surprising, given that even the title of the novel is a clear classical literature reference to "all kinds of tales related to the Netherworld" (Bernabe, 2015, p. 15), as 'Katabasis' derives its name from the ancient Greek term for 'descent'.[29] In "What is a Katabasis? The Descent into the Netherworld in Greece and the Ancient Near East" (2015), Alberto Bernabe makes a reference to R. J. Clark's account on "the 'Descend into the Underworld' theme" which is "inextricably connected with the mythological deeds of the heroes Gilgamesh, Heracles, Odysseus, Orpheus, Peirithous, Theseus, Aeneas, and many other who descended alive and returned from the Land of the Dead" (R. J. Clark, 1978, p. 3; cited in Bernabe, 2015, p. 15). Although Bernabe's observations reveal an inconsistency in the definition, noting that not all of the previously mentioned heroes have both descended to the Land of the Dead and returned from there (Bernabe, 2015, p. 15), Kuang's narrative structure still aligns with the overarching theme: the characters in her novel do indeed embark on a journey from our world to the Underworld, a journey steeped in academic rigour, scholarly studies and linguistic paradoxes, elements more closely associated with the fundamental principles of Dark Academia than a simple, autumn leaves-covered campus courtyard. In the article "The haunting of classics in the Dark Academia aesthetic" (2024), Tori F. Lee offers an analysis of the intersection drawn between Dark Academia's understanding in connection to the discipline of Classics, specifically "via Classical reception," where he posits that "Dark Academia interacts with the ancient world in a similar way to the Gothic: through a series of fragmentary references that invoke the idea of 'Classics' more than any particular text, artwork, or mythological figure from antiquity" (Lee, 2024, p. 421). Therefore, while online subcultures may prioritise the fragmentation of elements to merely evoke a general academic atmosphere, it is to be expected that authors with an academic background writing within the Dark Academia

[26] Rio, M. L. (2024, November 8). All Academia Is Dark Academia. *Electric Lit.* Available at https://electricliterature.com/all-academia-is-dark-academia/

[27] Rio, M. L. (2024, November 8). All Academia Is Dark Academia. *Electric Lit.* Available at https://electricliterature.com/all-academia-is-dark-academia/

[28] R. F. Kuang's *Babel* has won Blackwell's Books of the Year for Fiction in 2022, and the 2022 Nebula Awards for Best Novel

[29] "Katabasis." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/katabasis. Accessed 7 Sep. 2025

genre are likely to utilise their personal experience and understanding of academia not merely to provide an aesthetic backdrop to their novels but rather to convey ideas through the medium of the academic language.

As indicated in the previous paragraphs, the role of language and literature has always been of pivotal significance within the Dark Academia genre. Not as a mere stylistic addition or element, rather as a fundamental component of the genre's structural and thematic complexity. This role is crucial for comprehending the nuances of intercultural communication in the context of Dark Academia, especially given that the main plotlines of the representative novels of the genre are frequently based on a profound reverence, or even obsessive fascination, with the interplay between language, culture and literature. Therefore, this article will explore the manner in which language and literature belonging to the genre of Dark Academia do not simply constitute content; rather, they function as elements part of a phenomenon that filters reality through its particular lens in their distinct ways.

LITERARY AND LINGUISTIC INTERSECTIONS

The Dark Academia genre can be characterised by an intellectual, prestigious and often even pretentious atmosphere, skilfully conveyed through the physical settings and the manner in which characters interact. Language and discourse frequently romanticise traditionally dark and philosophical themes, questioning mortality, isolation, and obsession, the pursuit of something vast and physically unreachable, teetering on the borderline of our world. The style of lingo also reflects this attribute, reminiscent of cosplay: particular words and phrases used by the characters create an impression of intelligence and depth, however, these can also easily come across as insincere, tortured, both prideful and superficial, as if "intellectualism becomes more about appearance than substance" (Schäfer, 2024, p. 76). Characters of the genre also constantly switch between languages, casually using Latin, French and ancient Greek to interpret concepts or to suggest deeper meanings, almost as if demonstrating exclusivity and even elitism, effectively isolating themselves from the outside world into their own peculiar microcosm of like-minded individuals (Amoako, 2022; Schäfer, 2024, p. 83). This approach is closely linked to a fixation on canon texts and traditional literary works, which involves extensive knowledge and deep familiarity of the narratives created by philosophers and authors like Homer, Plato, Shakespeare or Dante, and ultimately, this can manifest in a sense of superiority over those who lack the same level of expertise.

Dark Academia characters use literary works and literary references as a means of defining their identity, as if literature is not merely read, but rather lived and experienced. These characters find closer relations with fictional individuals than with real people, and consequently, their lives also reflect a framework of tragic literary arcs, where ordinary encounters are experienced in opulent, stylised prose, echoing the romantic or even haunting tones of eighteenth and nineteenth-century classics. The consequence of this is twofold: firstly, the style of writing and the characters' stream of consciousness mirror the aesthetics of philosophical and academic texts, packed with allusions, metaphors, and lyrical expressions that evoke the otherwise sublime qualities. Secondly, the thematic elements of hubris, fate, and hamartia foreshadow the downfall of the protagonists, thus drawing parallels with the tragic narratives drawn from the pages of Greek or Shakespearean plays.

In order to contextualise this theory, it is noteworthy to examine the contrast in the manner in which certain Dark Academia novels utilise languages (particularly those that are considered ancient, archaic, philosophical, and literary) employed as a thematic and stylistic device that is

steeped in an academic manner, as opposed to solely aesthetic purposes. In the genre's two earliest texts, known as urtexts, *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains*, the function of language is dominant within the narrative. It shapes the text and evokes alluring qualities such as mystery, beauty, and a sense of otherness. In both novels, there are examples of canon texts which are able to conjure up an atmospheric world where languages intensify emotions. However, the chosen passages in relation to those texts also foreshadow the downfall of the characters.

In *The Secret History*, the novel recounts the story of a small group of students of Ancient Greek at a highly selective liberal arts college in Hampden, Vermont, whose obsession with the loss of self in order to "leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime" (Tartt, 1993, p. 38) leads them to recreate a Bacchic, Dionysian ritual. During the frenzy, one of the students presumably accidentally kills a farmer, and the burden of the secret ultimately culminates in the murder of one of their own. The characters' thoughts and reasoning are continuously affected by the contemplation, rationalisation and interpretation of ideas and words by Plato, Aristotle, Homer, and Euripides, in an effort to try to comprehend what it truly means to "rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn" (Tartt, 1993, p. 45).

In fact, *The Secret History* opens with the main protagonist and narrator, Richard Papen's philosophical observation whether

> "Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside of literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs" (Tartt, 1993, p. 5).

Richard's eagerness to blur the lines between reality and fiction is very clear from the outset of his introductory dilemma, drawing on the concept of *hamartia*, as derived from Greek tragedies, to rationalise and perhaps reason the repercussions of both his own actions and those of his friends. This viewpoint might be further supported by the quote used immediately after his philosophical musing: "A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies" (Tartt, 1993, p. 5); an untranslated line in a new paragraph, italicised, but without further explanation being provided. In point of fact, the line comes from *Délires II ("Delirium II")* by poet Arthur Rimbaud, "a section of *Une Saison enenfer* (1873; translated as "A Season in Hell," 1931) where Rimbaud looks back on the *Derniers Vers*, ironically and affectionately repeats some of the poems, and ambivalently sees them as "L'histoire d'une de mes folies" (the account of one of my follies) and as a stage in the process of the "alchimie du verbe" (alchemy of the word), the creation of a new poetic language".[30] The choice of this particular line right on the opening page of the first chapter appears to be highly descriptive of Richard's perspective and mind-set. Rimbaud's 'foolishness' is evident in his lamenting of all the things he enjoyed. Richard, on the other hand, was consumed by his desire to be part of a secretive and charming group of highly intellectual individuals engaged in seemingly profound discussions about ancient Latin and Greek texts, and found himself captivated by the allure of an aesthetically pleasing image of academic life. Therefore, in a manner similar to Rimbaud's 'lack of good sense,' Richard's narrative could be interpreted as a sort-of tell tale of his mad obsession and unhinged fascination with the romanticised fragments of the 'picturesque.'

If We Were Villains records the story of a close-knit cohort of theatre students at Dellecher Classic Conservatory, whose unwavering dedication was centred on meticulously recreating

[30] Arthur Rimbaud. *Poetry Foundation*. Available at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/arthur-rimbaud

selected Shakespearean plays: "We spent four years —and most of us years before that— *immersed* in Shakespeare. Submerged. Here we could indulge our collective obsession. We spoke it as a second language, conversed in poetry, and lost touch with reality, a little" (Rio, 2017, p. 297). From the very beginning of their scholastic endeavours, the seven of them were type-casted, assigned to specific roles to embody, such as the *loyal sidekick, the hero, the villain, the tyrant, the femme fatale, the ingénue and the chameleon*, which were perfected to the point where it became difficult to even differentiate between their characters and their own identities. Even the language they use to communicate with each other has been carefully selected to accurately represent their roles, while also maintaining a sense of authenticity. This is best seen in the characters' everyday communication, where they simply respond to each other with lines borrowed from Shakespearean plays they have previously performed:

"Well," I said, "*blood will have blood.*"
"Well, I plan never to get on your bad side."
"Likewise," I said. "You make a surprisingly convincing villain."
He shrugged. "Better me than Richard. He looks really murderous."
(...) "*Sound and fury*," I said, "*signifying nothing.* Don't mind him." (Rio, 2017, p. 87)

Oliver Marks, the narrator and main protagonist of the novel, starts his recollections with an introspective observation, reflecting on his circumstances, imprisoned for a murder he claims to have committed, with the following thought on his mind: "I sit with my wrists cuffed to the table and I think, *But that I am forbid / To tell the secrets of my prison-house, / I could a tale unfold whose lightest word / Would harrow up thy soul*" (Rio, 2017, p. 9). In a manner similar to Richard, Oliver also alludes to the idea of telling a story, and leaving it to the reader to decipher its factuality through various references and implications. The author here employs the Dark Academia style, encouraging the reader to conduct their own research which reveals that the line in question is taken from *Hamlet*, where the Ghost speaks to Hamlet about a story it cannot tell and thereby is left full of agony, illustrating Oliver's inner turmoil. William Shakespeare and his plays have a crucial role in *If We Were Villains*, with each quote and line having a specific purpose. The characters speak more truthfully about their inner thoughts through reciting particular lines, showing how language mirrors the roles they play, both on stage and in real life. Therefore, the Shakespearean language serves as a shared code, constructing group identity through literature, a universal translator for expressing guilt, fear, love, grief or loss: "The things about Shakespeare is, he's so eloquent ... He speaks the unspeakable. He turns grief and triumph and rapture and rage into words, into something we can understand. He renders the whole mystery of humanity comprehensible" (Rio, 2017, pp. 297-298).

There is a notable similarity between *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* as both texts exhibit a shared appreciation for the beauty of language and literature, with their ability to both reveal and confine identity. In this particular genre, such elements are frequently intentional, allowing the reader to develop a more intimate understanding of the characters, as if reading between the lines. In most cases, given the elements of unreliability and obsession of the narrative, it is more important to consider what is being concealed, often articulated through quotations or philosophical and literary references. As outlined in the two urtexts, in most cases there is no indication whatsoever as to the meaning of phrases in either Latin or ancient Greek, there is also no explanation provided as to which particular Shakespearean play is being quoted. It is entirely up to the reader to decipher these as they read, and in doing so, move from starting as an outsider to slowly being integrated into the group's story, which is unfolding on the pages.

TRANSLATION AS AN ACT OF BETRAYAL

R. F. Kuang's bestselling historical fantasy epic, *Babel: Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators' Revolution* was published in 2022, and in difference to *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* it was purposefully marketed as fitting to be referred to as a Dark Academia book, "ambitious and powerful while displaying a deep love of language and literature. Dark academia as it should be".[31] As expected from a novel of the genre, the story revolves around an academic journey of a group of students with one of them as their journey's narrator. They are secluded and lonely, dependent on each other through their shared traumas and bonds, yet at the same time, their experience is vastly different to that of Richard and Oliver.

Babel utilises the framework of a dark academia, speculative fiction novel with magical fantasy elements to explore and critique the complex interplay between language, translation, social hierarchy and power. As it is in the case of this genre, the novel encourages the reader to critically examine the role of language in shaping individual and collective identities in relation to the understanding of the world and power dynamics. Maryann Nguyen argues that "Dark academia's inherent interest in the self-referential criticism of academia lends itself to further darkness via injustices" which are used to "unravel the detrimental impacts of academic nostalgia" (Nguyen, 2022, p. 68), while Susan Hopkins claims that "it is important to resist the dark academia romanticisation of elite institutions because it reproduces the erroneous and discriminatory assumption that only the most talented, gifted or privileged belong at university (Hopkins et al., 2024, p. 3). Anneke Schewe and Melissa Schuh write that "*Babel*'s historical setting within Oxford's elite university life of scholar gowns, small colleges, and charismatic professors clearly evokes dark academia's aesthetic and literary connotations, and expands on its tendency to hybridity with a postcolonial perspective" (Schewe & Schuh, 2025, p. 254). *Babel* explores the concept of translation studies and focuses on the way in which translation goes beyond linguistic trans-coding, enhancing cultural and political competence and interpretation. The novel is set in a seemingly utopian Oxford in the 1830s, a place characterised as "the city of knowledge, the city of dreaming spires" (Kuang, 2023, p. 46), with an imposing tower at its heart. Known as Babel, Oxford University's prestigious Royal Institute of Translation is an elite faculty of linguistics scholars with a research focus on 'silver working,' which involves the implementation of silver bars with magical powers through the process of translation, specifically by using match-pairs to enhance the power of the silver, from which the British Empire's global dominion stems. However, this act of translation is by no means neutral: students in Babel come from a variety of geographical origins and colonial territories of the Empire, torn from their homes at a very early age with the charming promise of growing up and attaining a key role in the centre of all knowledge, an academic fantasy of intellectual haven. In reality, they are being manipulated as puppets to serve purely the interests of the Empire, resulting in the complete uprooting of their connection to their respective countries of origin, retaining merely their linguistic abilities, while their perspectives are effectively cut off: "Babel collects foreign languages and foreign talent the same way it hoards silver and uses them to produce translation magic that benefits England and England only" (Kuang, 2023, p. 101).

For this reason amongst many others, the novel's main protagonist, Robin Swift, is forcibly faced with the challenge of discovering his true linguistic identity. This contrasting hybridity,

[31] Kirkus Reviews, 12 July 2022, Available at https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/rf-kuang/babel-kuang/

caught between the language of his heritage and that of the Empire, is best exemplified at the very beginning of the novel when Robin is rescued from Canton by the British professor, Richard Lovell, during an outbreak of Asiatic cholera. Professor Lovell saves Robin by using the power of a silver bar imbued with a match-pair of French-English words: '*Triacle – treacle.'* The boy survives, but he also displays a fascinating ability: not only does he experience the effects of the magic as an observer, he also seems to understand its deeper implications to some extent, even if he is unaware of the reasons why: "The boy took another deep breath. Then he said, in surprisingly good English, 'It's sweet. It tastes so sweet...'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 6). The interplay between the words *triacle-treacle* refers to their close etymological connection, meaning golden syrup or molasses (something very sweet and cloying) but also an obsolete term for a remedy or antidote against poison or a venomous bite.[32] The magic here works only if there is a gap between meanings in two languages, but also close enough to the same concept so they can remain valid together, "that sublime, unnameable place where meaning [is] created".[33] Even though Robin is just a young Chinese boy who is only somewhat familiar with English, his remarkable use of the language is partly thanks to the Englishwoman, Miss Betty, who lived in their household, teaching him and conversing with him; and partly because of the mysteriously sent parcels Robin received from a far-away residence in Hampstead, "filled entirely with books written in English" (Kuang, 2023, p. 9). Robin's talent to comprehend languages beyond the surface level seals his fate, which unbeknownst to him, was already determined.

Another example for this is when Professor Powell shows Robin a silver bar engraved with English and Chinese words on either side. His connection to understanding how the bar might work is strengthened by his knowledge of both languages. Although he is still unfamiliar with the circumstances and mechanism of the object, only known to him as "silver talismans," "rich men's magic spells, metal amulets carrying blessings from the gods," or "trapped demons" (Kuang, 2023, p. 10), he immediately takes notice of the language: "the calligraphy looked a bit strange, as if drawn by someone who had seen them and copied them out radical by radical without knowing what they meant. They read: 囫囵吞枣. '*Húlúntūnzǎo*,' (...) 'To accept without thinking.'" (Kuang, 2023, p. 11). Once again, as a result of his natural comprehension of the language, rather than any learnt understanding of the mechanism of the silver bar, he experiences the power of the match-pair on a physical level. The idiom is used to describe the act of accepting information without digesting it, however, it also has a literal meaning, to 'swallow the date whole'.[34] And Robin's experiences of reading the sentence out loud is one of "a cloying sweet taste (...). *Like dates*, (...) He was drowning in them" (Kuang, 2023, p. 11).

While initially Robin perceived his situation as a dream come true, where "all that mattered were the dead languages before him, and the fact that one day, a day that drew ever closer as the years trickled by, he would matriculate at the university he knew only from the painting on the wall" (Kuang, 2023, p. 46), to belong somewhere where he and his ability is appreciated, he soon had to discover the dark side of the ivory tower as well. Babel draws attention to the weaponisation of language as a colonial tool that exploits the languages of

[32] "Treacle." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/treacle. Accessed 7 Sep. 2025.

[33] Pulley, Natasha. (2022, September 10). Babel by RF Kuang review – an ingenious fantasy about empire. *The Guardian*. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/10/babel-by-rf-kuang-review-an-ingenious-fantasy-about-empire

[34] Yu, Ning. (2003). Chinese Metaphors of Thinking. Cognitive Linguistics. 14. 10.1515/cogl.2003.006. Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/270846365_Chinese_Metaphors_of_Thinking

colonised people, while puppeteering them and making translation the instrument of force and imperialism. Robin is not the first and certainly not the last victim of this power dynamic. Both language and translation could be viewed as a symbolic and literal critique of linguistic loss and also the betrayal of ethical complexities and cultural identity: "Translation means doing violence upon the original, means warping and distorting it for foreign, unintended eyes. So then where does that leave us? How can we conclude, except by acknowledging that an act of translation is then necessarily always an act of betrayal?" (Kuang, 2023, p. 155). It is possible to interpret this matter through the interaction and dynamic between Robin and his half-brother, Griffin, who actually explains to him that them being brought to Oxford was always Professor Lovell's plan, and that he had intended to use them as pawns, as simple tools from the very beginning:

"I'm your failed predecessor, you see. Dear old Papa took me out of the country too early. I've got a natural ear for tones, but that's it. My fluency is largely artificial. I don't have memories in Chinese. I don't dream in it. I've got the recall, I've got the language skills, but I can't reliably make the bars work. Half the time they do nothing at all." (Kuang, 2023: 184-185)

Griffin's response materialises in the form of metaphorical vengeance, where Robin must decide whether he will allow those in positions of power to use and control him but continue to cling to his illusory sense of aesthetic belonging within the walls of Babel; or whether to follow Griffin's plan and legacy and destroy this monument of arrogance, forecasting the downfall of Babel: "Robin stared at him, alarmed. In Chinese, the phrase *huǒyàowèi* meant literally 'the taste of gunpowder'; figuratively, 'belligerence, combativeness'. His brother smelled of gunpowder. He reeked of violence" (Kuang, 2023, p. 394).

In Kuang's novel, the fall of Babel is absolute in order to create (and hope) for a new, just relationship between languages and power, a direct reference to the biblical Tower of Babel, destroyed by God because humanity sought to challenge divine order: "Language was always the companion of empire, and as such, together they begin, grow, and flourish. And later, together, they fall" (Kuang, 2023, p. 5). One of the clearest acts of betrayal is exemplified through the dispossession of Robin's real name, which is never revealed to the reader. Instead, there is only a framing connotation that begins on the first pages of the novel, when Robin is dying of cholera and suddenly hears "an eerie sound from nowhere; a ringing, a singing" with Professor Lovell's shadow in the corner, as if "this tall, pale figure in black had come to reap his soul" (Kuang, 2023, p. 6). This foreshadows the events in Robin's final chapter in the book, when he looks up and sees "Babel, falling in and upon him" and, amidst the rumbles, hears his mother saying his name (Kuang, 2023, p. 538).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the aforementioned Dark Academia novels all use elevated language and literary references, as well as the critique of academia in different ways to reflect on a more profound meaning. On initial observation, both *The Secret History* and *If We Were Villains* appear to romanticise and aestheticise this style, employing elements as a mirror or mask to express disturbing beliefs and truths, such as the obsession with immortality or the pursuit of the picturesque at any cost. However, this beauty, the very attribute that is intended to bind the characters together, thereby establishing their shared, inner understanding of the collective identity they seek to embody, ultimately results in their destruction – an illusion that both

corrupts and exiles: “A good Shakespearean actor—a good actor of any stripe, really—doesn’t just *say* words, he *feels* them. We felt all the passions of the characters we played as if they were our own. But a character’s emotions don’t cancel out the actor’s—instead you feel both at once” (Rio, 2017, p. 297).

The study focused on the manner in which trough written communication, literary culture, interpretation and translation can be used to identify hidden details within the text, enriching and shaping the narrative and the interplay happening between the characters. The Dark Academia genre, while indeed presenting a romanticised version of academia, also encourages the reader to debunk the superficial interactions that may be perceived at first glance and highlights the importance of a deeper, intellectual engagement. This is exemplified by the contemporary discourse occurring within literary circles, where literary works are being caught in the crossfire when they promote the value of academic engagement and critical thinking, as opposed to simply prioritising aestheticised pretentiousness. The role of language and literature is of significance in the context of the genre, insofar as they shape both collective and individual identities in the story, and influence the foreshadowing elements of the genre, as well as the characters’ perspectives and choices. They function as a channel between the author and the reader, thereby serving a profound purpose in embracing “the real intellectual work of the academy, which is to read closely and critically, with a healthy separation of fact and fiction, romance and reality”.[35]

Nevertheless, *Babel* reads differently than the two urtexts, its literary merits are subject to divergent interpretations. While it also permits a considerable degree of reader interpretation, the novel is amended with extensive academic and multilingual references and footnotes, infusing the text with a more analytical and critical tone, making it more akin to a history textbook than speculative fiction. Its perspective shifts back and forth between the speculation of whether language can liberate or only oppress, and the attempt to articulate an inherent betrayal or devotion in translation. It reads more like a meta-text in the sense that it is somewhat more similar to an archival or historical document, exploring and clarifying the myths and truths of a fallen academic realm. The book, embodying the principles of Dark Academia, demonstrates an ambition and desire to create a lasting impression: to be questioned, absorbed, translated and remembered, by “Showing yourself to the world, and hoping someone else understands” (Kuang, 2023, p. 537).

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