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George Steiner's *After Babel* in contemporary Translation Studies

After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation, by George Steiner, Second Edition, Oxford/New York, Oxford University Press, 1992 (First edition was 1975), 538 pp., £9.99 (hbk), ISBN: 9780192 828743

George Steiner's monograph *After Babel* is a living plea for translation. For him, translation as meaning transfer is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather a basic anthropological activity and 'formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication' (Steiner 1975/1992: xii; cf. also 49).¹ With such a view, he undermines the conceptualization of Translation Studies as merely one of the Communication Sciences, but rather presents the activity of translation as *conditio sine qua non* (p. 290) of all human communication and all human mental activity. The following is a brief outline of the main themes of Steiner's book (I) before his reception in modern Translation Studies is traced (II).

1. Core ideas of Steiner's language and translation theory

In *After Babel*, George Steiner lays the foundation for Translational Hermeneutics. According to Steiner's "'totalizing" designation' (p. 293), the terms communication, understanding and translation are almost interchangeable. Communication is based on understanding, and understanding is only possible through translation processes across times, spaces and different borders (p. 29). This transformation is always interpretive and creative to the extent that it can give to all expressions a vital duration that outlasts the act of utterance (p. 28). Thus, translation is not to be understood as a marginal area of the theory of language. Rather, it is itself the core area and touchstone of every theory of language (Steiner masterfully presented this concept in his critique of Generative Grammar and its search for linguistic universals).

According to Steiner, the linguistic ability is a defining characteristic of the human race. Four different fields of tension determine his idea of 'living' in a language: (1) Language has physical and mental parts; what languages have in common is that they become potent instruments of sense-experience (pp. 303ff.). (2) Language is always time-bound and time-creative at the same time. Statements are attached to the present, and to the present ego, which expresses or receives them. And yet it is only through language that man is in a position to overcome this very attachment to the present. The reconstruction of the past (pp. 31, 138ff.) and the imagination of the future (pp. 145ff.) are only possible in and through language. (3) Language usage is also located in the continuum between privacy and the public sphere (pp. 169ff.). Ever larger concentric circles of collective languages enclose in their center an individual with his or her own idiolect, which also threatens to corrode communication with others. 'Difficult' texts (p. 187) of symbolism, dadaism, hermeticism, etc., are, thus, to be seen as symptoms of the return to one's own private language and as a way of avoiding 'stale and promiscuous words' (p. 184). (4) Language is only superficially an instrument for naming the environment and for conveying true messages (pp. 19, 129ff.). The far greater power lies in its ability to create counter-worlds in

which untruths, fictions, ambiguities and play prevail (pp. 228ff.). Steiner describes this characteristic of every imaginable language as 'altertnality' (p. 232).

For the translation scholar, the re-reading of Steiner's by now 45-year-old monograph is still of fundamental value today. It underpins the popular semiotic distinctions in Translation Studies of three types of translation – intralingual, interlingual and intersemiotic translation (Jakobson 1959, 233). It discusses and supplements this almost inflationary triad from a variety of perspectives, but also emphasizes the essence of what all three types of translation have in common: the human effort to achieve mutual understanding. Steiner places a special emphasis on intralingual or 'internal' translation (p. 29), which takes place in the context of supposedly identical language bases. For the author '[t]he concept of a normal or standard idiom is a statistically-based fiction' (p. 47). Knowledge barriers separate people across times and spaces. There are barriers in technical communication between experts and laypersons (pp. 25), in communication between children and adults (pp. 35–39), between men and women (pp. 39–47), and many more examples could be cited. The 'language worlds' (p. 39) Steiner speaks of are not only the residence-places of entire collectives, but are also always the 'habitation in reality' (p. 23) of every single individual (p. 47). This makes translating as interpersonal communication between these possibly radically different worlds a ubiquitous phenomenon.

For Steiner, interlingual translation, which refers to 'process[es] of life between languages' (p. 251), is the best-known special form of human transfer activity. After a periodization of translational thinking (pp. 248ff.), he traces the discussion about translatability (pp. 76ff.), which oscillates between the 'poles of argument' (p. 77) of possibility and impossibility. The feeling of helplessness towards a text that refuses to be transferred (pp. 253ff.) is countered by the factual efforts repeatedly made to translate texts (pp. 256ff.). The fundamental possibility of translation is repeatedly proven, but also varies sensitively depending on time, place, text type, etc. The reception of texts from other times and cultures is not open to every generation. Since both the original and any translation referring to it are determined by their historicity, retrospective interpretive comprehension therefore has no end. Throughout history, different types of translation have been distinguished (p. 266). Steiner refers to three of them: (1) strict literalism, which, in Steiner's eyes, is the most difficult method (p. 324), (2) conscientious but independently functioning reproduction, and (3) imitative re-creation.

Steiner has also attempted a theoretical foundation for intersemiotic translation, a transfer method that has only come into focus in Translation Studies since the 2010s. In his opinion, language is only one of many forms of expression (pp. 49ff., 81, 436ff.). If 'translation' refers to the practice of the transfer of meaning, then the area in which verbal and nonverbal signs interact as phenomena of combination or substitution must inevitably also be taken into account. Using the example of the setting of poetry to music (pp. 438–446), which also justifies the dedication of *After Babel* to 'scholars of [...] music' (p. xviii), Steiner explains how music, added to language, creates its own world of meaning. Such a transfer enables a reference to language and music that corresponds to the source and the target text as well as to the source and target culture. Constants of meaning in time, which are revealed in many media of expression (language, music, visual and performative arts, etc.), are invariants of the anthropological discourse of translation and must lead to a theory of 'topoi' (p. 448) – today one would speak of 'transmediality' (Rajewsky 2002, 12ff.). Thus, antique themes form a basis to which man comes back again and again (pp. 23ff, 452ff.). Also on the basis of this last type of translation it becomes evident that translation represents a (cultural) anthropological constant.

Steiner is interested in the reconstruction of the translation process and thus lays the foundation for modern translation process research (pp. 288ff.). With his ‘four-beat model of the hermeneutic motion in the act of translation’ (p. xvi), he traces the translator’s changing relationship with the source text that is offering him resistance. The first phase is initiative trust in the semioticity of the world in general and the meaningfulness of the text in particular (p. 312). As with any advance of trust, the handling of a text also entails the risk that the knowledge attained does not justify the effort of text reception (p. 312ff.). The second phase consists in the thoroughly violent invasion and aggressive appropriation of the knowledge contained in the source text (p. 313). The text is plundered, leaving behind an empty scar (p. 314). The obtained prey is incorporated into one’s own knowledge system. The translator, and with him also the target culture, is gradually enriched by the imported goods. Only with the fourth phase does Steiner’s model acquire a cyclical structure (pp. 316, 319): the compensatory measures which seek to balance out the situation and restore the dignity of the source text (pp. 316ff., 415ff.). Through translation an original text is then recompensed by getting ‘a persistence and geographical-cultural range of survival’ (p. 416) and remains effective beyond its historical presence.

For Steiner, translating means becoming aware of undeniable diversity (p. 29), of the difference between languages, idiolects and textual worlds, and at the same time finding the foreign as an inexhaustible source of creativity. Translation is an activity in precisely this stable field of tension between attraction and rejection, ‘*Wahlverwandtschaft* (elective affinity)’ (p. 398) and exoticism (p. 378), which is briefly thrown out of balance by the translation process, but is then restored. In this way man is assured of his ability to communicate and thus escapes a return to an Adamite language, which would mean the entropy of natural languages and would ultimately and irreversibly lead to silence.

2. Reception of George Steiner’s *After Babel* in the field of translation studies

The provocative power of Steiner’s contribution to Translation Studies can be seen in its extremely diverse reception, which encompasses a broad spectrum of reactions, ranging from the attribution of a decisive significance to translation research and great popularity, even among non-specialists, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, sharp criticism – especially from adherents of strictly scientific translation research – or even complete ignorance.

Steiner was particularly well received in Anglo-Saxon Translation Studies. The international handbook *Übersetzung Translation Traduction* (Kittel et al. 2004) is significantly opened by Steiner with the essay ‘Translation as *conditio humana*’. In the 1st edition of the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Baker 1998), Steiner’s contribution is cited as the only one (Robinson 1998) under the hermeneutic approaches to translation. In introductory English-language works such as Munday’s (2012) and Dimitriu’s (2006), he is presented as the only representative of the hermeneutic direction. His book *After Babel* is celebrated in many statements as ‘a monumental’ work (Munday 2012, 265), which continues Schleiermacher’s tradition in translational hermeneutics: ‘The hermeneutic movement owes its origins to the German Romantics. [...] However, it is George Steiner’s hugely influential *After Babel* which was the key reference for the hermeneutics of translation’ (Munday 2012, 243–44).

French Translation Studies also pays tribute to Steiner. In his *Introduction à la traductologie* Mathieu Guidère asserts: ‘*After Babel* est une contribution majeure à la réflexion sur l’importance et le rôle de la traduction tout au long de l’histoire’ (Guidère 2008, 13).²

In this volume as well, the hermeneutic approach is illustrated exclusively by Steiner's translation model (Guidère 2008, 48–50). Its importance in the history of translation theory is particularly emphasized: 'L'originalité du parcours herméneutique proposé dans son ouvrage se distingue nettement de l'ensemble des publications théoriques sur la traduction: il est clair que Steiner fait partie de la liste très brève de ceux qui ont dit quelque chose de fondamental et de novateur sur la traduction' (Guidère 2008, 13).³ Recent introductory works such as Belgaid's *D'Ablancourt à Kiraly. Introduction à la traductologie* deal with Steiner's periodization of the history of translation (Belgaid 2018, 4–5).

In German Translation Studies, on the other hand, Steiner was for a long time surprisingly either ignored or tended to be criticized. In overview presentations such as Radegundis Stolze's *Übersetzungstheorien*, which is regarded as the standard work in the German-speaking world, Steiner's approach is only presented from the 6th edition of the book (Stolze 2011) with an explicit reference to its 'special position' (Stolze 2018, p. 145) and its 'very metaphorical language, which met with little approval in the field of translation studies' (Stolze 2018, 145). In his *Einführung in die Übersetzungswissenschaft*, which has also become a reference work, Werner Koller contents himself with qualifying Steiner's book as 'scholarly' (Koller 2011, 53) and refrains from any further discussion. Holger Siever mentions Steiner at a few points in his *Übersetzungswissenschaft: Eine Einführung* (2015), but does not deal with Steiner's translation model.

In the literary hermeneutics of translation, an ambivalent relationship to Steiner's work can be observed. Friedmar Apel recognizes Steiner's authority as a 'true homme de lettres' (Apel 1982, 28) and appreciates *After Babel* as 'a fundamental work of literary translation research' (1982, 28), but, on the other hand, unmistakably criticizes Steiner's shortcomings, because 'as much as he commands a cosmos of knowledge, and through his multilingualism he has a special sensitivity for the subject, he has not satisfactorily mastered his material. The problems are more passing in revue than solutions are offered' (1982, 243).

In the new research field called Translational Hermeneutics, a systematic 'passer sous silence' could be observed for a long time. His name rarely appeared in these contributions, and if it did, then only selectively and predominantly critically. Wilhelm, for example, estimated: 'ce modèle reste vague et pose de nombreuses difficultés' (Wilhelm 2009, 108). It is only in recent years that Steiner's presence has gained more contour and the discussion about Steiner's hermeneutic model has been sparked. In the two presentations of the hermeneutic approach in standard works of the discipline, such as *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* and *Handbook of Translation Studies*, which can be traced back to representatives of this research direction, a dichotomy of reception can also be observed: While Robinson sees Steiner's model – despite some problematic aspects – as 'a salutary alternative to recent linguistic and sociological systems models' (1998, 99), a critical tone cannot be ignored in the intensive discussion of Steiner's concept by Stolze: His description of the process of understanding 'neglects the self-critical reflection underlined by Schleiermacher' (Stolze, 2010, 143), 'the real difficulty in translation, seen from the hermeneutical translator's point of view and not descriptively from the outside like in Steiner is the problem of formulating' (Stolze, 2010, 144), 'not all translations are necessarily inadequate, as Steiner affirms' (Stolze, 2010, 145). The most systematic and at the same time sharpest criticism of Steiner's model from the side of Translational Hermeneutics comes from Kharmandar, who claims that Steiner's model is not even genuinely hermeneutical: 'The investigation, quite contrary to popular belief, reveals that Steiner's reading only partially relies on hermeneutics, and that at many levels it is counter-productive to hermeneutic research' (Kharmandar 2018, 84). He focuses in his criticism on four aspects, namely the

‘overcomplicated style and diction’, the inadmissible ‘overreliance on literature’ as well as the ‘theoretical and methodological shortcomings’ of Steiner’s hermeneutic motion (p. 84).

The sharpest criticism of Steiner’s conception of language and translation, however, came from supporters of deconstructivist and feminist positions. Deconstructivists reject Steiner’s universalist view and his belief in the existence of meaning. (Steiner’s setting of God as a ‘guarantor of meaningful speech’ has, by the way, also dissatisfied many other readers.) Feminist translation theorists such as Sherry Simon (1996) and Lori Chamberlain (2012) classify Steiner’s translation model as sexist. Particularly attacked are his description of the approach to the source text in terms of an erotic appropriation and his reference to Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Anthropologie structurale*, ‘which regards social structures as attempts at dynamic equilibrium achieved through an exchange of words, women and material goods’ (Steiner 1992, 319).

Despite criticism, the pursuit of the hidden effect of Steiner’s model of translation on recent translation research would certainly be an interesting investigative perspective. Steiner’s remark, ‘since it first appeared, *After Babel* has been drawn upon and pilfered, often without acknowledgement’ (Steiner 1992, xi), seems to be shared by some translation scholars. Dimitriu also notes: ‘Contemporary translation scholars are frequently reluctant to openly acknowledge their indebtedness to his groundbreaking book, although “signs” of its impact are frequently present in their works’ (2006, 103).

According to Dimitriu, Steiner’s contribution influenced current translation research in many respects. In methodological terms, for example, Steiner had a strong effect on the cultural and ethical approaches (Matsudo-Kiliani 2004; Bex 2006; Goodwin 2010), where theoretical considerations are substantiated by numerous case studies and historical digressions in their relevance to the present are discussed.

Terminologically – although ironically his metaphorical style of presentation was probably the most criticized point – Steiner is subliminally present in many other approaches: ‘Much of Steiner’s metaphorical, highly suggestive terminology, some of which is imported from the German Romantic School, from philosophy, and metaphysics but which is also, and to a great extent, his own, has subsequently been adopted by a number of translation scholars’ (Dimitriu 2006, 103), e.g. patronage, cultural authority (Lefevre), domestication, elective affinity, resistive difference, magnification (Venuti), encirclement and ingestion, transfiguration, creative dislocation (Cannibalist school), cultural asymmetries (post-colonial discourse).

In terms of content, Steiner has also uncovered new fields of research for translation studies through his detailed investigations of the function of translations in the context of a culture. For example, ‘translation as taboo’, a direction approached by Douglas Robinson in a book devoted to this issue. Venuti’s discourse on the translator’s invisibility may well have to do with Steiner’s image of the translator as a ‘ghostly presence’, while Marilyn Gaddis Rose’s ‘speculative approach’, her techniques of analysis of literary translations and her ‘interliminal spaces’ have something in common with Steiner’s ‘inherently unstable midspeech’ where translation is located (Dimitriu 2006, 104). As far as translation that takes into account non-verbal and especially musical signs is concerned, Agnetta (2019) has explicitly taken impulses from Steiner’s theory in his work on the transfer of polysemiotic complexes to a target culture.

No less significant is the influence of *After Babel* on the scientific careers of important translation scholars such as Douglas Robinson, who reports a formative encounter with this book as a young translator and translation scholar: ‘I found Steiner’s book, and read it avidly, cover to cover. [...] It was thrilling to me! Steiner gave me a useful overview of the translation scholarship that he himself valued – especially the German Romantic tradition

– and that struck a chord with me as well; he was a sensitive reader of literature and philosophy, and brought to his task a hermeneutical sensibility, which I immediately embraced; but what I especially valued was the force of his personality, which exploded off the page. I took him on as my mentor in the field of Translation Studies, as I was just beginning to explore it’ (Panda 2017, 94).

The manifold impulses that still emanate from Steiner’s monograph today are far from being exhausted. A new confrontation with the presented and also the unconsidered guiding ideas of his oeuvre may then counteract Steiner’s pessimistic premonition, which he formulated in 1991 – on the occasion of the English reedition of *After Babel* – as follows: ‘Yet even in this corrected guise, *After Babel* will, I suspect, continue to be something of a scandal or *monstrum* which the guilds of linguistic scholarship and linguistic and analytic philosophy will prefer to neglect’ (Steiner 1975/1992, xvi).

Notes


1. Unless otherwise stated, the page numbers refer to Steiner, George. 1975/1992. *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
2. ‘*After Babel* is a major contribution to the reflection about the importance and role of translation throughout history’ (Editor’s translation).
3. ‘The originality of the hermeneutical path proposed in his book is distinctly different from all the theoretical publications on translation: it is clear that Steiner is part of the very brief list of those who have said something fundamental and innovative about translation’ (Editor’s translation).

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