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George Steiner's Legacy:
Assessing the Past and Future
of Translation Studies

**Engaging with Translation.
New Readings of
George Steiner's *After Babel***

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George Steiner's Legacy: Assessing the Past and Future of Translation Studies

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1 George Steiner in the Collective Memory

How much world a word contains, probably no one knew more precisely than George Steiner. (Mara Delius in *Die Welt* [DW], 04.02.2020)¹

On February 3, 2020, George Steiner, almost ninety-one years old, passed away. In the obituaries, the large and small newspapers in the German-speaking world supplied plenty of epithets for this renowned writer and philosopher of language. In the *Berliner Zeitung*, Arno Widman called him “the great keyword giver” (BZ). In the *Tagespiegel*, Gregor Dotzauer described him as a “sad thinker” and a “cultural pessimist on a lost cause” (IS). Steiner appeared playful and virtuosic to Ulrich Greiner who, in *Die Zeit Online*, characterized him as a “cosmopolitan dancer of thought” (ZO). Simon Strauss described Steiner in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* as an “scholar moved by art” (FAZ). For Willi Winkler, he was a “cosmopolitan” (SZ), and Felix Bayer quotes Joschka Fischer who lauded Steiner on the occasion of the awarding of the Ludwig Börne Prize 2003

1 All following translations are provided by us (M. A., L. C., B. O'K.).

as a “polyglot observer” (quoted in DS). Mara Delius lamented in *Die Welt* the loss of an “artist of thought”—presumably, moreover, the “last of his kind” (DW).

Across the entire media landscape, deeply appreciative words about Steiner abound, words which are more than pro forma expressions following the convention of the *de mortuis nihil nisi bene*—all this despite the fact that the writings and statements of Steiner are anything but uncontroversial. George Steiner’s achievements as a “cosmopolitan comparatist” are always acknowledged positively, but necessarily briefly and by way of selected excerpts from his vast oeuvre. The career of this “artist of thought” (DW) is rudimentarily traced on the basis of a few key biographical dates, almost always including his family’s flight from Nazi soldiers in 1940 and their journey to New York. Yet the focus is largely on Steiner’s intellectual achievements which, as Widmann vividly explains, are by no means limited to literature:

Steiner climbs every mountain, he shows us from up there the worlds of music, art and literature, of mathematics and thought, but he is never [Edmund P.] Hillary. Steiner is Tensing Norgay, the Sherpa who knows every path and every footbridge, who helps us to understand all our lives what we are doing when we try to think, to write, to sing. (BZ)

This humility, even awe, at the dizzying abundance of intellectual creativity that pervades Steiner’s oeuvre leads Greiner to call him “a giant of old European learning, an essayist and writer of the highest order” (ZO). In particular, his achievements in the genre of the “free-ranging” (SZ) essay are praised in many obituaries (for instance, BZ, FAZ, DS, DW), and in terms of which Steiner emerges as “one of the most important storytellers of the twentieth century” (BZ). Widmann calls Steiner an essayist in the true sense of the word, regards him as ‘one who tries’ (and hence fails):

In every line of Steiner’s oeuvre, the trace of this failure can be felt. But this is precisely what makes his greatness, the uniqueness of his texts. As brilliant as his sentences may be, as free as his associations, as wide-ranging as the arcs of his investigations, one never hears a triumph in them. (BZ)

Although Steiner must certainly have been no stranger to the joy of well-formed sentences and completed books (cf. BZ), for him writ-

ing was a kind of negotiation process, namely with his own biography, with the rapid and ever-changing circumstances of 20th-century society, and with the (supposedly) enduring treasures of human achievement. His essays are, not least, an attempt to negotiate, reconcile, and play off thinking and expressing against each other—two activities that can be considered leitmotifs in Steiner's books and which are illuminated and profiled from manifold perspectives. Arguably one of Steiner's great achievements is to counter the dynamics—at times the tragedy²—of these processes of negotiation by way of an elegant choice of words and dexterous handling of subject matter. Delius remarks, for example, “no one could so elegantly mediate between words and reality” (DW).

Probably for reasons of economy of space or because of the sheer size of the book, obituaries rarely address Steiner's *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. However, when this book is mentioned, there is agreement on the central position and intellectual-historical relevance of this work: according to Winkler, “‘After Babel’ (1975), his study of language and translation, is still considered a foundational work of comparative literature” (SZ), and for Delius it is undoubtedly Steiner's “opus magnum”, in which the author is concerned with “translating the philosophy of translation from the Romantic period into a contemporary hermeneutics” (DW). Even if Steiner's writings are sometimes described as “seductive invitations without theoretic awkwardness” (FAZ), nevertheless, for the translation scholar who willingly confronts those very awkwardnesses, rereading his monograph, now more than 45 years old, is still of fundamental value—a value certainly not yet exhausted even.

2 Also mentioned in the obituaries is Steiner's essay „Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought“ (2005), published as a book in Germany.

2 George Steiner and Translation Studies: Productive Tension

After Babel is, therefore, undoubtedly one of those few great books on “the business” of translation (Schleiermacher ²1969: 42), one which offers plenty of food for thought, supplying enough material to occupy and stimulate translation research for decades more. There is, in Steiner’s book, much that has the power to provoke, to trigger a great diversity of reactions and to foster a wide array of critical engagements. *After Babel*, unlike so many other contributions to translation studies, has divided academic minds and, despite suffering vigorous, indeed fierce criticism, it is still of great value today. *After Babel* stands above such vehement, solidly argued criticism with a certain untouched sovereignty. Moreover: it “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). In the spirit of this assessment, the fact that one large-scale publication in translation studies—*Translation. An International Encyclopedia of Translation Studies* (Kittel et al. 2004)—was inaugurated by Steiner’s contribution “Translation as *conditio humana*” indicates a desire to pay academic homage to Steiner, and by extension to *After Babel* as well. *The Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics* performs a similar gesture: Steiner and *After Babel* are the central topics of the inaugural volume of this ongoing, year on year publication project.

We have reported in detail elsewhere (Agnetta/Cercel 2019; Cercel 2013: 92–98) on the very eventful and controversial reception of *After Babel* in translation studies. By no means has its impact on linguistics and translation studies research been fully assimilated. Rather, *After Babel* should be seen as a broad river into which many waters, such as commentaries, critiques, and tributes flow; in that way, Steiner’s book continues to nourish the modern translational landscape—ideationally as well as conceptually. Here, we merely point out two contrasting assessments, originating from different stages in the development of the discipline and from different

translatological cultures: these assessments are indicative of the two main trajectories of reception: Wolfram Wilss's sobering caution and Phil Goodwin's passionate appreciation.

Wilss' detailed review dates from 1977 and can therefore be considered a reaction of the "first hour" following the publication of the first edition of *After Babel* in 1975. The review turns out to be very critical. Against the background of the claims to scientific 'objectivity' of translology of that time, Steiner's book is perceived as a foreign body: in its striving for "the development of an integrated theoretical, descriptive, and applicative context of description and justification", translation studies was "suddenly" confronted with a book that was "rather idiosyncratic, not to say problematic" in terms of both content and method. Steiner's contribution "does not really fit into modern translology because its overall mystifying tendency is diametrically opposed to the considerations of translation studies, which aim at demystifying and objectifying their subject matter" (Wilss 1977: 53).

The objections that Wilss raises against Steiner's book in his extended discussion of each chapter are numerous: a clear thematic connection between the book chapters is not discernible; Steiner's defensive attitude toward modern linguistics (Wilss 1977: 57) is not comprehensible; there are too many fluctuations in judgment and abrupt interruptions; the characterization of, and links between the four phases of the hermeneutic model appear "largely nebulous" (ibid.: 56). Moreover, Wilss objects, Steiner ignores a large part of recent translatological scholarship. Wilss feels the greatest discomfort, however, at Steiner's "murmuring" or "mystifying" style of presentation (ibid.: 57, 58) which reaches its climax in the esoteric final passage in Steiner's book. The conclusion of the review is unambiguously formulated: "Undoubtedly" *After Babel* is "an important book in many respects", but the result clearly falls "short of expectations" (ibid.: 57), since it does not present an "analytic, methodically stringent, logically consistent argumentation" (ibid.: 54).

Phil Goodwin's discussion of Steiner's book takes place at a much later date and against the much changed disciplinary background of translation studies in the 2010s—at issue in particular is

translation studies’ ethical focus. His assessment is diametrically opposed to that of Wilss. Steiner’s hermeneutic model, Goodwin declares, represents “a highly developed and subtle example” (Goodwin 2010: 20) of a responsible hermeneutic approach to translational material and, more fundamentally, it provides “a powerful tool in clarifying ethical issues” of translation (ibid.: 38). Steiner’s decision to adopt a hermeneutic model of the translation process is easy to understand in this context because hermeneutics “already contains within itself an ethics of translation” (ibid.: 20): it implies a dialogue with the other and thus presupposes the willingness to submit, at least temporarily, to the demands of the other. The point of this conversation—and this is a guiding norm from the hermeneutic point of view—is to maintain a fundamental openness by not insisting on the primacy of one’s own way of thinking and seeing. “The point” in Steiner’s translation concept is “to honor the presence of an Other by attending carefully to what he says, and re-creating it for a third” (ibid.: 40).

Goodwin highlights two merits of *After Babel* in particular: (1) Steiner’s “acute sensitivity” (Goodwin 2010: 28) to ethical issues which arises from a particular view of language and translation. Steiner conceives of language as a gnosis, i. e. a secret code that defines a group by including some (the knowing) and excluding others (the not-knowing). To intrude into another’s gnosis via translation is always, in a sense, an act of aggression and potentially abusive (ibid.: 29f.). Thus, the act of translation always involves a certain violence, and this makes ethical questions inevitable. Steiner’s open recognition and description of the brutality of these processes in his hermeneutic motion is “one of his most important contributions” (ibid.: 34) to the understanding of the act of translation. (2) Another merit of Steiner’s hermeneutics is that “it does not over-simplify” (ibid.: 38). Researchers thinking about the ethical dimension of translation too often succumb to the temptation to simplify what, after all, is a very complex situation involving multiple interests (those of the author, the translator, the reader, etc.) and responsibilities. Steiner’s model attempts to subtly describe this complex multidimensionality of the translation process.

The two statements on Steiner's book cited here exemplify two major streams of reception: on the one hand, there is the reticence of (German) translation studies, in which Steiner's approach has found "little approval", and probably not just for stylistic reasons (Stolze 2018: 145); on the other hand, there is the appreciative recognition that (English) translation studies has given Steiner's work. His work has been deemed "hugely influential" (Munday 2016: 251) and it is "still the most thorough account of translation" (Hermans 2020: 232) from the point of view of philosophical hermeneutics. Of course, between these two poles of reception, a whole variety of reflexive encounters and counter-arguments is constantly occurring on all continents. For example, in a recent Colombian introduction to translation theory, "la propuesta hermenéutica de Steiner acerca de la traducción" is praised as "una de las mas interesantes e innovadoras" (Bolaños Cuéllar 2016: 369) whilst being subjected to critical discussion nonetheless (ibid.: 369–371). The present volume also bears witness to a similarly broad spectrum of reception. In any case, there is unanimity in translation research about the special position of George Steiner's *After Babel* —a work whose history of influence still continues against the background of the development and scientific desiderata of the discipline of translatology itself and in light of various translational cultures.

3 After *After Babel*: New Readings, Contemporary Critiques

The following essays engage with Steiner's work in a stimulatingly wide variety of ways. Nonetheless, in respect of *After Babel*, a significant number of essays direct their analytical attention to the chapter entitled "The Hermeneutic Motion". One question is accordingly whether Steiner, besides his assessment of the history of translation and discussion of numerous literary examples, also exemplifies a hermeneutic approach to translation. In her essay, Rade-gundis Stolze concludes that *After Babel* is better appreciated as a

florilège collecting the results of Steiner's subtle and sensitive reactions to literature and literary translation rather than a systematic exposition of the hermeneutic approach to, or understanding of translation.

As Larisa Cercel shows, however, Steiner's approach to his own literary examples is not always beyond criticism. For example, Steiner judges Jules Supervielle's poem "Chanson" to be rather poor, claiming that Paul Celan's translation is far superior than the original. Celan pays Supervielle the cruellest homage, Steiner says, since the translation cannot avoid revealing the French poet's flaws. But, Cercel argues, the question is why discussing translation so frequently devolves to comparing and contrasting original texts and their translations, or indeed playing the one off against the other. If comparing and contrasting is almost inevitable (though perhaps it shouldn't be), can there be a neutral way of doing so, or do such activities always elicit value judgements, whether negative or positive? Cercel's essay poses these and other questions to Steiner in order to examine the validity of the criteria upon which Steiner bases his evaluations.

In terms of Steiner's account of the hermeneutic motions of translation itself (there are, in fact, four motions at issue), a number of contributors re-assess one of the most controversial aspects of Steiner's hermeneutic model – his description of the moment when translation undertakes a violently penetrative appropriation of the original text. Many readers react extremely negatively to Steiner's account of the violence of translation, especially in view of what some take to be the depiction of specifically sexual violence. As Douglas Robinson's essay shows, *After Babel* therefore gives us an interesting example of a book that can trigger feelings of offence. Feelings themselves accordingly affect the nature of our scholarly engagements with Steiner's text and because this is so, feelings require serious scholarly analysis in their own right. Moreover, as Robinson develops his enquiry, the discussion necessarily turns to the matter of whether that feeling of offence is mitigated by what, in the subsequent hermeneutic motion Steiner describes, are ethical reparations in view of the prior motion of appropriative violence.

But, besides the ethical necessity of repairing the hermeneutic damage, the reparation envisaged by Steiner is also a matter of achieving a certain equilibrium between the original text and the translation. Steiner's hermeneutic model is therefore wedded to stability—the fourth motion must, he says, effectuate a final harmonious balance. Yet, as Clive Scott emphasises in his essay, Steiner does not therefore consider the desirability of translations that are exuberantly imbalanced, or which enact motions of ramification and proliferation. For that reason, Steiner's book, Scott argues, lacks a sense of exuberance and neglects to consider translations that permit themselves an optimistic sense of experimental play. Scott accordingly proposes his own approach to translation and supplies intriguingly suggestive examples of his own translations as a way of showing how one might displace Steiner's view of translation and its tasks—move away, that is, from Steiner's somewhat sober preference for balanced equalities, and indeed his frequently pessimistic view of translation's possibilities, towards an almost postmodern sense of translation as an exploratory engagement with language, poetic rhythm, and indeed the materiality of the paper page.

But inasmuch as Steiner's hermeneutic model does advocate for the achievement of balance and parity, one question is how translation can achieve such things at all. Steiner's advocacy is expressed in the form of vivid metaphors, and hence another area of engagement with *After Babel* concerns how readers, critical or sympathetic, react to Steiner's famously elegant writing style. But, in that case, a major difficulty in respect of Steiner's four motions of translation emerges, namely that a good deal depends on how seduced we are by the metaphors and stylish analogies Steiner uses to describe each motion. These metaphors and analogies are indeed seductive and stylish, but they are also, as Brian O'Keeffe argues in his contribution, somewhat incoherent. Once those metaphors are taken seriously (to the degree that one can, or should take them seriously), it becomes possible to offer a critique of Steiner's supposedly hermeneutic model and indeed, as O'Keeffe provocatively does by invoking Jacques Derrida, deconstruct that model.

After Babel is a generous book. It gives readers many avenues of critical, if not necessarily deconstructive enquiry to pursue. Nonetheless, all of the essays express admiration for what Steiner achieved. His achievements, to be sure, are many. Beata Piecychna, for instance, stresses Steiner’s profile as a hermeneutic thinker in order to put him into a dialogue with the hermeneutic philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer. Besides the specific matter of translation, Piecychna demonstrates that both Gadamer and Steiner traversed similar terrain in respect of the activities of understanding itself, and moreover in their joint assessments of the ineradicable relevance of historical context. *After Babel* amply shows, in fact, how pioneering Steiner actually was, not just in terms of hermeneutic thinking in general, but also in terms of what can be called the semiotics of translation. As Marco Agnetta suggests in his essay, the sixth chapter of *After Babel*, entitled “Topologies of Culture”, anticipates more recent scholarly discussion on polysemiotic communication and intersemiotic translation. Think of a composer setting a text to music, for instance: this entails a complex performance of significance conveyed by both music and words. Agnetta, like Piecychna, albeit in their different ways, assess what is indeed pioneering in Steiner’s work – it is partly a matter of the deep connections that can be made between Steiner and other hermeneutic thinkers, and partly a matter of showing that Steiner’s work still has pertinence in view of the topics that more contemporary debates in Translation Studies attend to and seek to explore.

In that regard, the debates at issue have benefited from voices which come from a wide variety of sectors in the Translation Studies community, and which moreover come from parts of the globe that Steiner himself, largely confined to the study of Western literary texts, neglected. Thus the reception of Steiner’s work is a topic addressed by two contributions in particular—that of Jörn Albrecht and that of Yifeng Sun. Albrecht takes up the reception of *After Babel* in connection with the reception enabled by translation, precisely—*After Babel* was about translation, but its wider renown came about thanks to the fact of its being widely translated. Thus Albrecht reads and assesses Steiner in both his original English, and

in comparison with the French and German translations. For his part, Sun provides a valuable account of how Steiner, and *After Babel*, was read, understood, and critiqued in China. More valuably besides, Sun reflects elegantly, and by way of certain examples drawn from Chinese and English, on the applicability of Steiner's hermeneutic model to practical exercises in translation.

4 Steiner the Man, *After Babel* the Book

What is not in doubt, as all of the essays in this publication demonstrate in their different ways, is that Steiner's work has had a considerable impact upon Translation Studies. Thus the section *Appreciations/Würdigungen* gathers together a number of distinguished translation scholars and invites them to record their recollections and reminiscences of Steiner and his work. Jean-René LADMIRAL reiterates Steiner's own characterisation of himself as a *maître à lire* – that mastery, LADMIRAL observes, involves an intellectual competence that very few, if any, can nowadays rival. Douglas ROBINSON, for his part, acknowledges the impact of *After Babel* on his own development as a translation scholar, but evinces certain reservations concerning the literary judgments Steiner offers, from time to time, in that book. Like Larisa CERCEL, ROBINSON adverts to that striking and problematic example, namely Steiner's evaluation of Supervielle and Celan. Still, and as Christian BERNER confirms as well, the richness of *After Babel* cannot be denied. It was, BERNER says, a book of dizzying richness, and that *étourdissement* was a result of what BERNER, following Steiner himself, characterises as Steiner's quite impressionistic approach to literature and translation. Like MONET, one might say, Steiner offers multiple perspectives in order to help us see or re-see what texts and translations can be. The authors of the essays published here take the same stance one might adopt in view of a late Monet canvas: they stand back, and in so doing afford themselves a measure of critical distance. But they also engage closely and sympathetically with the detailed intellectual textures of Steiner's text, aiming thereby to better appreciate the extraordinary vision George Steiner had of translation.

Readers will judge for themselves whether such impressionistic and scholarly ambitions are realised by this first edition of the *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics*. But, since the conversation between Steiner and contemporary Translation Studies deserves to be prolonged and enriched, readers of the present volume will also find considerable interest in the *Reviews* that follow the section devoted to Steiner. Moreover, since the intellectual spirit of this volume is intended to be hermeneutical, and because hermeneutics models itself on the staging of tactful dialogue, this volume ends with a section entitled *Forum*. Here, space is afforded for intellectual debate, in this case between Klaus Peter Müller and Rainer Kohlmayer, and in view of a point of contention that the editors judged was worthy of further discussion.

Hermeneutics embraces multiple viewpoints, and this is what the present volume attempts to represent. Some of these viewpoints are critical, some less so. But none of the essays published in this volume seeks to consign Steiner’s work to the archives of the past. On the contrary, these essays explore Steiner’s legacy in view of the present and future state of Translation Studies, whether hermeneutically oriented or not. This amounts to a collective exercise in ensuring that *After Babel*, in particular, remains a book to be read both now, and in future. Consider, in that regard, Steiner’s title: *After Babel*. If “Babel” means confusion (though it doesn’t always mean that), then we need sure guides to help us negotiate that bewilderingly multilingual context. George Steiner is one such guide, and the hope of the present volume is that his guidance is not forgotten as we advance into the futures of a situation that remains always *after Babel*.

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