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After Babel and
the Impediments of Hermeneutics:
Releasing Translation
into its own Territory

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

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After Babel and the Impediments of Hermeneutics: Releasing Translation into its own Territory

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Abstract: This article proposes that Steiner's account of a hermeneutic translation does not square with his deeper linguistic and literary sympathies, that he often puts himself in contradictory argumentative positions, despite the vigorous clarity of his reasoning, and that he might find a suitable home for those sympathies and some solution to his predicament in the kind of translational model that is offered here. While Steiner takes pleasure in language's capacity to make room for individual privacies, for the contingencies of idiolect, and to create the imaginative space for 'alterity', that is, for the hypothetical, the suppositional, the optative and conditional, the kind of hermeneutic translation which he promotes fosters sobriety, balance and durability, and resists the excessive and the proliferative. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that many of the conclusions he draws from translation are negative and tinged with defeatism; we can only regret that he does not use his own discovery of stalemate to imagine the kind of translation that might outwit polarized positions. The article includes, as worked examples, translations from the first stanzas of Lamartine's "L'Isolement" and Verlaine's "En sourdine".

Keywords: Paralanguage, Idiolect, Historicity, Lexicalism, Inherent Meaning, the Semiotic, the Semantic, Formality, Alterity, Ecology.

1 Bones of Contention

Hermeneutics immediately places us in the quandaries of knowledge. How much knowledge do we attribute to the author? What knowledge does a work activate? What knowledge is relevant to that work? Is the person who brings more knowledge to a work a better reader? Is an ignorant reader condemned to interpretative incompetence? Is the world of interpretation a naturally competitive world? Is the best interpretation the one that commands the broadest consensus? But none of these questions has much to do with my own particular preoccupation, the experiential fruitfulness of a work for the individual (translating) reader. These are questions, nonetheless, that George Steiner's *After Babel* (1975/²1992/³1998) willy-nilly, and possibly despite itself, buys into. Steiner's opening interpretations—of *Cymbeline* and Austen in particular—follow a certain progression: glossary, syntax, wider literary context, at whose outer edge lie considerations of a more paralinguistic kind, such as tonality, intonation, accentuation. Certain assumptions underpin these interpretative excursions: that, teleologically, the “complete reader's” (Steiner 1975: 5; ³1998: 5) interpretative horizon is “the full intentional quality” (Steiner 1975: 5; ³1998: 5) of a text; that a certain body of knowledge needs to be processed to reach this horizon; that that body of knowledge exists prior to the critical investigation; that that body of knowledge is an integrated whole, as if all parts were acquainted with each other; that that body of knowledge is shared (shareable) by the community, or at least the community of scholars. This means that associative connections, across the literary environment, have intertextual status (are the exercise of an absorbed knowledge/awareness) and are not involuntary connections subject to the vagaries of memory, random echoes, non-chronological re-assemblies. These assumptions are the basis for what Steiner might call “assured reading” (Steiner 1975: 11; ³1998: 12). But as he reaches the outermost of his concentric circles, as we have indicated, Steiner runs into paralanguage and idiolect, the one enacting the force and modal colouring of

what is said,¹ the other constituting the imprint in language of an individual user's particular life experience.² These are literary and linguistic values that lie close to Steiner's heart, but which hermeneutics, and the translational practice attached to it, make little room for. Is there a version of translation that might do them better justice?³

Inasmuch as knowledge has the virtue of shareability, is a public property, and is implicitly reckoned to constitute an integrated whole, another and converse property of hermeneutics is the control it seeks to exert, the limits it seeks to put on the random and proliferating: "Interpretation (translation) keeps the pressures of inventive excess from overwhelming and randomizing the medium. It limits the play of private intention, of plurality in meaning, at least at a rough and ready level of functional consensus" (Steiner 1975: 281; ³1998: 296). Interpretative translation is a safeguard against speech's natural tendency to be in excess, to say more than is needed. This tendency, for Steiner, sets human beings "out of balance with and in the world" (1975: 281; ³1998: 296), when to judge by the fourth stage of his hermeneutic motion (Chapter Five) and his view of dialectics, the maintenance or restoration of balance is a presiding ideal.⁴ This all gives hermeneutics the look of a politically

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- 1 "As we grow intimate with other men or women, we often 'hear' in the slightly altered cadence, speed, or intonation of whatever they are saying to us the true movement of articulate but unvoiced intent" (Steiner 1975: 46; ³1998: 48).
 - 2 "Part of the answer to the notorious logical conundrum as to whether or not there can be 'private language' is that aspects of every language-act are unique and individual. They form what linguists call an 'idiolect'. Each communicatory gesture has a private residue. The 'personal lexicon' in every one of us inevitably qualifies the definitions, connotations, semantic moves current in public discourse" (Steiner 1975: 46; ³1998: 47).
 - 3 I should confess that my own particular preoccupation is the translation of poetry. But I have elsewhere provided examples of the ways in which the ideas for translation expressed here might be applied to prose (cf. Scott 2012a: 76–78 (Maupassant) and 2012b: 146–152 (Colette)).
 - 4 Steiner's terminology of rebalancing, of self-stabilizing reciprocity, includes "contrapuntal coherence" (Steiner 1975: 320; ³1998: 337), "radical equity" or "equalizing transfer" (Steiner 1975: 396; ³1998: 416).

suppressive mode of thinking, devoted to linguistic sobriety and the limitation of plurality.

A further aspect of interpretation is its desire to invest the work with a durability, to extend the time of its effectiveness: “‘Interpretation’ as that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription, is what I am concerned with” (Steiner 1975: 27, ³1998: 28). Interpretation is the measure, or rather a safeguard, of the work’s lasting effectiveness. But this puts hermeneutics in a difficult relationship with historicity, with the raw force of situated speech, whose reality Steiner would certainly wish to allow for.

2 Alternative Propositions

2.1 Idiolect and lexicalism

Of the two “outer” aspects of his textual examinations, paralinguage and idiolect—in my view not to be put apart in any performative modelling of text—Steiner soon leaves paralinguage to one side, presumably as being beyond meaningful notation. Idiolect, on the other hand, an equally speculative feature, becomes a more insistent preoccupation, particularly in the third chapter:

No two human beings share an identical associative context. Because such a context is made up of the totality of an individual existence, because it comprehends not only the sum of personal memory and experience but also the reservoir of the particular subconscious, it will differ from person to person. [...] All speech forms and notations, therefore, entail a latent or realized element of individual specificity. They are in part an idiolect. (Steiner 1975: 170; ³1998: 178f.)

What might then cause the reader some consternation is Steiner’s view that, while natural language itself, by its very “multivalence”, serves idiolect—

Natural language is local, mobile, and pluralistic in relation to even the simplest acts of reference. Without this “multivalence” there would be no history of feeling, no individuation of perception and response. (Steiner 1975: 204; ³1998: 214)

—translation, which Steiner describes at one point as “the transfer from one designative coherence to another” (Steiner 1975: 205; ³1998: 215), works only to undermine it: “The entire business of translation, the current search for universals in generative grammars, express a fundamental reaction against the privacies of individual usage and the disorder of Babel” (Steiner 1975: 205; ³1998: 214f.). Translation serves public interests and has no truck with the preservation of the idiolectal. The hermeneutic condition, the hermeneutic conviction, denies Steiner access to those very qualities of language which, for him, constitute the literary, and it does so in two closely related ways.

Steiner’s scholarship makes of him a lexicalist, and a defender of text-inherent meaning, despite his sensitivity to the idiolectal. His underlying standard of translational judgement is correctness against the written original. This lexical tradition puts Steiner in the line of Hölderlin, Heidegger, Benjamin. Steiner is a man of etymology, the history of usage, the learned dictionary.⁵ It sets him against Mallarmé, for whom words, by virtue of syntax or linear disposition or serial semanticity, are the “transitions d’une gamme” [transitions in a scale] (Mallarmé 1995: 330), a vision of a dynamic semantics as opposed to Steiner’s semantics of buried treasure, of excavation. Of Hölderlin, Steiner (1975: 329–330; ³1998: 347) writes:

It is in the individual word that the elemental energies of immediate signification are literally embodied. The hermeneutic recapture of original intent at the sentence-level is illusory because all sentences are context-bound and their analysis involves us in a dilemma of infinite regression. Only the word can be circumscribed and broken open to reveal its organic singularity.

Translation for Steiner then becomes a most precious process of elicitation, an “*Umdichtung*”,⁶ “*ein Herausheben*” of unseen implicit-

5 “A true reader is a dictionary addict” (Steiner 1975: 24; ³1998: 25). But compare this with the later remark: “a dictionary is an inventory of consensual, therefore eroded and often ‘sub-significant’ usages” (Steiner ³1998: 207). Steiner’s argument here, too, seems at odds with itself.

6 Glossed by Steiner as the “apposite double meaning of ‘poetic transformation’ and ‘con-densation’ or ‘compaction around an object’” (Steiner 1975: 327; ³1998: 344; Steiner’s italics).

nesses, a correction in the direction of making manifest what has failed to appear.

Against this approach we should set Benveniste's criticism of the Saussurean sign, that it leaves language unitised in its lexemes, without providing a transition to larger units (phrase, sentence, discourse, i. e. *parole*), and is thus unable to develop a semantics of enunciation. While the semiotic and the semantic co-exist in language, they often seem to do so one at the expense of the other, largely because they are two distinct modes of signifying; and while the Saussurean sign is a fruitful source for semiotic thinking, the semantic is in need of "un appareil nouveau de concepts et de définitions" (Benveniste 1974: 65) [a new apparatus of concepts and definitions]. Benveniste concludes thus:

En conclusion, il faut dépasser la notion saussurienne du signe comme principe unique, dont dépendraient à la fois la structure et le fonctionnement de la langue. Ce dépassement se fera par deux voies:

- dans l'analyse intra-linguistique, par l'ouverture d'une nouvelle dimension de signifiante, celle du discours, que nous appelons sémantique, désormais distincte de celle qui est liée au signe, et qui sera sémiotique;
- dans l'analyse translinguistique des textes, des œuvres, par l'élaboration d'une métasémantique qui se construira sur la sémantique de l'énonciation (Benveniste 1974: 66).

[In conclusion, we need to go beyond the Saussurean notion of the sign as unique principle, upon which both the structure and functioning of language would depend. This supersession will be achieved along two routes:

- in intra-linguistic analysis, by the opening up of a new dimension of meaning, that of discourse, which we call semantics, henceforth distinct from the semantics of the sign, which will be semiotic;
- in the translinguistic analysis of texts and works, by the elaboration of a metasemantics which will be constructed on the semantics of enunciation. (trans.: C. S.)]

Relatedly, distrust of the critical validity of the performative realization of text leads Steiner to a favouring of text-inherent meaning over conferred meaning. For Steiner, the reader extracts from the text but does not feed into the text, whereas for Wilhelm von Humboldt, whom Steiner so much admires, the exact sense of language only takes its final shape in the mind of the individual who speaks/

hears it. Furthermore, in the circumstances of speech/dialogue, Humboldt tells us, misunderstanding between speakers, the non-coincidence of their idiolects, is made fruitful in the dialectic of dialogue itself, which is progressive and never completed, rather than being a mechanism of resolution:

Erst im Individuum erhält die Sprache ihre letzte Bestimmtheit. Keiner denkt beim dem Wort gerade und genau das, was der andre, und die noch so kleine Verschiedenheit zittert, wie ein Kreis im Wasser, durch die ganze Sprache fort. Alles Verstehen ist daher immer zugleich ein Nicht-Verstehen, alle Uebereinstimmung in Gedanken und Gefühlen zugleich ein Auseinandergehen. (Humboldt 1836/2003: 330)

[Only in the individual does language receive its ultimate determinacy. Nobody means by a word precisely and exactly what his neighbour does, and the difference, be it ever so small, vibrates, like a ripple in water, throughout the entire language. Thus all understanding is always at the same time a not-understanding, all concurrence in thought and feeling at the same time a divergence. (trans.: Heath 1988: 63)]

Through a vocative relationship, two idiolects, those of writer and reader/translator, can fruitfully be woven together. But for Steiner, the text to be translated is accusative rather than vocative, not a cooperative You but a recalcitrant It.

We must beware, then, of making texts the storehouses of the treasures of language, of making the movement of reading/listening purely “ingressive”, so that we find ourselves in pursuit of the Chinese boxes of meaning, the meaning within meaning, the meaning of meaning (cf. Steiner 1975: 375f.; 1998: 394f.). Our affair is with sense, with the Humboldtian proposition of the transience of sense, of a semanticity that is completed only in the individual reader’s associational world:

Die Sprache, in ihrem wirklichen Wesen aufgefasst, ist etwas beständig und in jedem Augenblicke Vorübergehendes. Selbst ihre Erhaltung durch die Schrift ist immer nur eine unvollständige, mumienartige Aufbewahrung, die es doch erst wieder bedarf, dass man dabei den lebendigen Vortrag zu versinnlichen sucht. Sie selbst ist kein Werk (*Ergon*), sondern eine Tätigkeit (*Energie*). Ihre wahre Definition kann daher nur eine genetische seyn. (Humboldt 1836/2003: 315)

[Language, regarded in its real nature, is something constantly and at every moment in transition. Even its maintenance by writing is always just an in-

complete, mummy-like preservation, only needed again in attempting thereby to picture the living utterance. In itself it is no product (*Ergon*), but an activity (*Energieia*). Its true definition can therefore only be a genetic one. (trans.: Heath 1988: 49)]

For all his admiration for Humboldt, Steiner's hermeneutics puts his linguistic persuasions at odds with some of Humboldt's more ground-breaking insights.

2.2 Signifier and "alterity"

Hermeneutics manages to be a force for sobriety, for the suppression of 'inventive excess', by letting the signified control the signifier, that is by compelling the signifier towards stabilisation in the concept. Translation's task should be to reverse that priority rather than strengthen it, which, in turn, entails developing the dynamic of sense rather than fostering the consolidation of meaning.

When we speak of restoring priority to the signifier, we are speaking of resisting the signified as accrued meaning, there to be excavated and unravelled into its component parts (etymology, history of usage), and instead activating the *energeia* of sense-making, which includes the sense invested in linguistic form. The *energeia* of sense-making is a constant process of the acquisition and dispersal of sense, of multiple semantic energies, momentarily distilled, immediately scattered. This activity is not the activity of the signified, but is ever immanent in the signifier/*signifiant*. The signifier carries sense rather than already possessing it; and it acquires sense not in *langue* but in the contingent circumstances of discourse. This discourse generates the life of the *signifiant*, projects its subjecthood. The subject is then its own constitutability—not a given subject, an individual, an identity, but the subjectivable, a point of view, a personal pronoun I, a relativity constituted by the physicality and formality of the signifier, and the consequent modality of its sense. And its formality is principally its metrico-rhythmic being, or rather, its metrico-rhythmic becoming. Translation into a new formality/layout allows the *signifiant* to discharge changing idiolectal energies, energies of discursive circumstance and of acoustic distribution.

Formality is, then, an integral and sustaining feature of the signifier in its maximization of sense-making, of the contingency of the medium, of its “randomization”, of “the play of private intention”. When Lamartine opens “L’Isolement” with:

Souvent sur la montagne, à l’ombre du vieux chêne,	2 > 4 > 2 > 4
Au coucher du soleil, tristement je m’assieds;	3 > 3 > 3 > 3
Je promène au hasard mes regards sur la plaine,	3 > 3 > 3 > 3
Dont le tableau changeant se déroule à mes pieds.	4 > 2 > 3 > 3

he gives “Souvent” status as an initial dissyllabic measure, working out from under (“Sou[s]vent”) to above (“sur la montagne” + “sur la plaine”), its “underness” (/u/) still to be heard in “coucher” and “se déroule”. It is a disjunct adverb, constantly yielding its place to other adverbial phrases, which themselves are as if assumed into “tristement”, as time and place metamorphose, entropically, into mood; “tristement” echoes “souvent” in /ã/, an acoustic adverbial ending which becomes present participular and adjectival in “changeant”, as stable state is eroded by the volatile and oscillating. This abrupt and “projecting” “Souvent” is very different from the wholly assimilated and fluent “souvent (ce rêve)” (/s/ > /v/ > /s/ > /v/) of Verlaine’s rhythmically chiasitic:

Je fais souvent ce rêve étrange et pénétrant	4 > 2 > 2 > 4
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or from the “Souvent” that appears in the octosyllables of Lamartine’s “La Pervenche”:

Il y chante, et moi j’y médite	3 > 5
Souvent de l’aube jusqu’au soir	2 > 2 > 4/4 > 4

where “Souvent” is pulled between the verb (“j’y médite Souvent // de l’aube...”) and the following adverbial phrase (“j’y médite// Souvent de l’aube...”), as if the speaker were in an environment—in this case a spring—which muddled the filiation of frequency and duration.

So “souvent” incorporates itself into language, into life, in a dozen different guises, differently attuned by its acoustic environment and its metrico-rhythmic functioning. If we fail to take account of these modal modulations, these shifts of expressive sense, in translational versatility, then “souvent” will always return to its

colourless dictionary existence (“often”) and never function as a word deeply integrated into the changing modalities of situated human experience.

It is this restoration of expressive colour to language through formal means that paradoxically leads me, in my rendering of the first two lines from “L’Isolement”, to change a descriptive language into a situated or inhabiting language, and to promote the tabular, a layout of perceptual presence and living notation, over the linear, a layout of the optimally ordered account of the already lived:

up here	high up
	as many times before
	in the shadow
	of the old oak
and	
	with the sun setting
heavy hearted	I sit down

This version of translation involves the release of centrifugal forces, of a progressivism driven by the self-multiplying and metamorphic, as if different versions of the text were vying with each other to extend experiential possibility. This, on the face of it, is a programme for translation that Steiner rejects.

But then we encounter Steiner’s wonderfully sympathetic pages on Dada, Surrealism, Russian Futurism, and Lettrism (cf. Steiner 1975: 192–197; ³1998: 201–207), and the regret that explosive private languages are bound to lose their vivid new-coinedness the more shared, the more public, they become. It is in the very nature of language to create these new speculative experiential spaces, what Steiner calls “the elbow room of the mind, its literal *Lebensraum*” (Steiner 1975: 216; ³1998: 226; Steiner’s italics), or, as Humboldt would have it:

Denn sie [die Sprache] steht ganz eigentlich einem unendlichen und wahrhaft gränzenlosen Gebiete, dem Inbegriff alles Denkbaren gegenüber. Sie muss daher von endlichen Mitteln einen unendlichen Gebrauch machen, und vermag dies durch die Identität der Gedanken- und Spracheerzeugenden Kraft. (Humboldt 1836/2003: 357)

[For [language] is quite peculiarly confronted by an unending and truly boundless domain, the essence of all that can be thought. It must therefore make infinite employment of finite means, and is able to do so through the power which produces identity of language and thought. (Heath 1988: 91)]

This is not exactly the idiolectal nor the randomized, but it is closely related to them. Language, in its conditionals, its suppositionals, its optatives, is where individuals, and the societies they constitute, make imaginative space for themselves, give themselves options on alternative existences, escape the predictions of history; as Steiner puts it: “Through language, so much of which is focused inward to our private selves, we reject the empirical inevitability of the world. Through language, we construct what I have called ‘alternities of being’” (Steiner 1975: 473; ³1998: 497).

It is the projective, future-orientated nature of this *Lebensraum* of the hypothetical that should be emphasized:

Human consciousness recognizes in the existent a constant margin of incompleteness, of arrested potentiality which challenges fulfilment. Man’s awareness of “becoming”, his capacity to envisage a history of the future, distinguishes him from all other living species. (Steiner 1975: 217; ³1998: 227).

We want to propose that translation creates this forward-directed alternity of being, by itself acting as the agent not of transfer but of hypothesis; the source text (ST) begets the target text (TT) as optative, or conditional, or suppositional, by, as it were, dreaming off the text. Translation *justifies* the diversity of languages by itself pursuing alternity (not to be confused with alterity). Translation refuses to accept the world (ST) as it is; foreign languages are invitations to reimagine or reconfigure reality, to re-set perceptual co-ordinates, to change the chemistry of consciousness. It is perhaps not so surprising that after all the doubts and scruples that beset hermeneutic translation, Steiner should, in his “Afterword”, declare: “To move between languages, to translate, even within restrictions of totality, is to experience the almost bewildering bias of the human spirit towards freedom” (Steiner 1975: 473; ³1998: 497).

2.3 Historicity and ecology

It is too easy to think that literary texts exist in a space/time of their own. Translation must also install text *physically* in the real world of the here and now, reintroduce the ST into the urgency and specificity of time, into the mesh of space and overlapping *Umwelten*. In this world, long-lastingness is not the asset that mutability is, and Steiner's claim that a hermeneutic approach endows a work with durability, a slower time, threatens to ambiguate attitudes to historicism and historicity, a predicament which emerges in a particular paragraph in the earlier pages of *After Babel*:

One thing is clear: every language-act has a temporal determinant. No semantic form is timeless. When using a word we wake into resonance, as it were, its entire previous history. A text is embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure. To read fully is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs. (Steiner 1975: 24; ³1998: 24)

“Every language-act is determined by the situation in which it takes place. No language-act has a timeless significance. When we use a word we awaken its entire previous history”—Steiner's propositions seem to range too loosely between historicism (replacing the work in its original time and measuring change between then and now) and historicity (all utterance is living, inaugurative and specific to the speaking subject, situated in a here and now of living circumstance). Where historicism assumes an inherence of meaning in language, a signified, whose varied elements have their own claims to make, historicity enacts on language a triage, selecting a foreground of contingent features, particular signifiers, relating directly to the situation of speech. The final two sentences of the paragraph seem to express this contradiction: “diachronic structure”, the recuperable and accusative, plays against “immediacies of value and intent”, the responsive and vocative. Historicism enjoins upon us to give proper weight to accumulated meanings; after translation, the text is still the same text, still on a steady diachronic journey, still driven by inherency. Historicity, on the other hand, generates the needs and possibilities of new language, pushing language to its outer edge, where it invites the interferences of idiolect and paralinguistic

colouring. Where for historicism, translation is a way of taking the diachronic temperature of a text, for historicity, translation is a new situation, a reimagining of the life of a text. Where, with historicism, reading is absorbing a given printed text, reading, for historicity, is the enactment, the performance, of a script, a process of re-inhabitation, re-imagining a subject's being/becoming in the being/becoming of a text.

To approach translation as a manifestation of historicity, of the changing dynamic of contextual forces, is to ecologize it. The task of translation is the constant revision of texts in relation to a present world, the world of our presence, as readers/translators. The question is how one maximizes the capacity of language to generate ecosystems, as opposed to merely confirming linguistic systems. Part of the answer lies in the cross-medial/cross-sensory expansion that the text activates. Do we translate texts out of an ecologically threatened condition? We certainly do in relation to languages either on the brink of extinction or constrained by their minoritarian status; translation keeps such languages in the public eye, and holding their own expressively alongside hegemonic languages. And we do if we insist on a kind of translation which is not one of conservation (a repetition of the thing) but of adaptation/repurposing/re-metabolising (putting it to new uses, to new manners of being). The continual transformation of the ecology is part of the ecology.

Conservation is too stagnant an ecological notion; translation is not about the preservation of a species in a state that belongs essentially to the past, but about making species sufficiently adaptable to live into a future in which ecosystemic balances are constantly changing. Besides, conservational concerns for the bibliographical environment, as for the natural, have too much become concerns about continued spectacle (tourism of the literary canon, zoological tourism). And perversely, conservation often entails the evacuation of environments or, if unoccupied, leaving them untouched or open for a limited number of modes of occupation. We segregate ourselves from ecosystems in order to continue enjoying the benefits of them. Rarely is conservation imagined in terms of

the establishment of closer, more intricate and intimate associations with the environment. To change that bibliographically, reading must become a writing.

Things are not whats (their meanings) but their manifold hows, their manners of existing, the uses to which they are put, their functions in other lives. At present, these hows are too few, particularly in the world of texts and wild animals. Urban animals, on the other hand, tell a rather different story; and translation should turn texts into urban animals. Anything can happen in this open world; it is not a jigsaw. But what kind of language releases the hows of language? Metalanguages, languages of explicitation, are languages of closure and coercion, and should be avoided. Coercions equally operate through methodologies, disciplines, institutional thinking. We seek, instead, a language which embraces the improvisational subjecthood, the first/second-personness, of the signifier. The force of words must be relational, that is, woven into a fabric of first-hand experience rather than of reference or information, and requiring a situation rather than a sentence to make them signify existentially (idiolectally). It is through the reciprocities of translation that texts can, symbiotically as it were, that is, to their mutual advantage, live, no, capitalize on, difference/diversity as the instrument of metamorphic becoming, can achieve a self-realization which has nothing to do with establishing an identity, but all to do with enlarging and projecting an interactive capacity.

How does the 'TT' embed itself in the environment, an environment made of manifold *Umwelten*, intermeshed, all creating and drawing upon different hows of the 'TI'? It is a two-way traffic. First, translation must be alive to the ways in which the environment might inscribe itself in the text of the 'TT', an inscription which might involve some physical distressing of the text (tearing, crumpling, coffee stains, dirty finger-marks) or some intrusion into the text of extratextual sights and sounds (collage, onomatopoeia) [(see Section 4, Fig. 1)]. Second, text may inscribe itself in the environment either as an embedded physical object—the text adjacent to a bottle of milk, or lying on a garden chair—recorded in the text by photographic means perhaps (see Scott 2019: 100–109); or as a

lens, variously colouring perception of the environment, according to *Weltansicht*. And let us underline this role: translation is expressly an agent of textual eco-embedding, both through the physical design of text and through a development of metamorphic consciousness in the reader (different kinds of transferable subjecthood).

3 Re-thinking translation

Steiner's relatively brief preface to the third edition (1998) of *After Babel*, while noting the expansion of translational activity since the first edition (1975), both in terms of textual range—the greater incorporation of eastern European languages, for example—and of metamorphic practices,⁷ confirms what is, on his part, an undesirable capitulation, which dates from the first edition, to wit, the admission that a theory of translation is beyond our grasp:

After Babel tries to show that there cannot, in any strict or responsible sense, be any such 'theory'. The cerebral proceedings which would have to underlie and explain it are simply inaccessible. At best, we have narratives of translational *praxis*. It is to these that the most useful journals in the field are now turning. (Steiner ³1998: viii).⁸

7 The blurb of the third edition is misleading when it declares: "Since the first edition of *After Babel*, George Steiner has entirely revised the text," (Steiner ³1998: back cover). A thorough updating has certainly taken place, but underlying arguments, aside from the odd reformulation and addition, remain steadfastly the same.

8 This echoes the words of the longer, sardonically regretful preface to the second edition of 1992: "There are, most assuredly, and *pax* our current masters in Byzantium, no 'theories of translation'. What we do have are reasoned descriptions of processes. At very best, we find and seek, in turn to articulate, narrations of felt experience, heuristic or exemplary notations of work in progress" (³1998: xvi). These are the words of someone who has bemoaned the absence of attempts, prior to *After Babel*, "to explore the ways in which the constraints on translatability and the potentialities of transfer between languages engage, at the most immediate and charged level, the philosophic enquiry into consciousness and into the meaning of meaning" (ibid.: ix–x). These are the words of someone who has already expressed unequivocal scepticism about a knowledge of translation built on the empirical findings

But informative and fascinating as the world of the translational workshop, of successive drafts and revisions, may be, it does no justice to translation seen as a crucial opportunity to re-imagine the life of text, and as a way of fundamentally re-thinking the relationship between languages, and between texts and their eco-systems (*Umwelten*).

What then does the re-imagining of translation involve? It means a revolution in the translational enterprise, both in terms of *intention* and of *projection*. The reader, no longer a monoglot reader but a polyglot one, asks not what does the ST mean, but how does it operate, what forces, expressive and modal, are at work in it, and what features, formal and linguistic, activate these forces. What kind of subjecthood, what kind of experiential colouring do I wish to *intend* in this text? I, the reader/translator, address the ST (You) in order to produce an I-text in meaningful dialogue with that You-text. The ST is not a model for the TT (the reader is a polyglot and needs no repetition of text); the TT is an alternative ST event, a new dynamics of its utterance, a different *Umwelt* created out of it, in order that our cognition of the world through language is extended.

A translation produced for these purposes might very well look, in its word-selections and formal devices, like a 'traditional' translation produced for a monoglot reader. We must therefore be careful to ensure that a translation of the kind I describe is not read under a misunderstanding of what it is. And in order to ensure that that is so, I must be sure to *project* it in a way consonant with its ambitions. The idea of translation as projection falls into three aspects, each with its own set of entailments: (a) injecting the ST with a new subjecthood, an inhabitation of the text by point of view; (b) projecting the ST into its future, giving it the impetus of its becoming; (c) embedding the ST in the ecology of its reading.

Important for the establishment of subjecthood is the adoption of a vocative, rather than accusative, approach to the ST, so

of its practitioners: "The field is made neither formally rigorous nor continuous by an increase in the number and transparency of individual samples" (Steiner 1975: 275; ³1998: 289).

that I is cast as a first person in reciprocal exchange, in a dialectical dialogue, with a You, rather than as a manipulator of an It. For us, the signified is a manifestation of that It-ness; and only by reasserting the priority of the signifier can sense-making re-assume a subject-position. Additionally and consequently, translation will translate towards speech, that is to say, will translate the linguistic towards the paralinguistic—paralanguage belongs to the signifier—and the textual/written towards the performative; this involves the exploitation of typographic resource, of different layouts, of the handwritten, of graphic and chromatic doodling [(see Section 4, Fig. 1)]. Subjecthood is not to be understood as a self-affirming identity, but as the personal pronoun I, a shifter, a transferable subjecthood, a bundle of possible psycho-physiological responses. For this reason, the linear, which is not only dictated by textual and paginal convention, but also betokens a speech in full and confident possession of itself, must surrender itself to the tabular,⁹ that is, to enunciation still in the process of finding its optimal expressive position in a space ungoverned by either line or margin.

This latter shift, from linear consciousness to tabular, is vital for the ST's future, too. While linearity preserves notions of measure, of utterance that has found form, finality, unity (at the expense of what we shall never know), the tabular introduces into the linear new ways of envisaging it, new dispositions, the ability to make room for what might have been invisible in it, the sense of the improvisable, the mutational, the unstable; this involves our replacing the exclusionary tactic of choice for the inclusionary or serial mechanism of morphing. The tabular, in its cultivation of performative values also helps to draw the ST into an urgent time, out of historicism and into historicity, out of a situatedness of origins into a situatedness of here-and-now reformulation. This historicity, this acute situatedness, is equally indispensable to the renewed ecological embedding of the ST.

The embedding of the ST in the ecology of its reading environment also requires an expanding, unstriated space, a space in

9 For a more extended treatment of the tabular in relation to the linear, see Scott (2014: 249–257).

which centrifugal rather than centripetal energies can work. As it is translated, the ST must be able to move into the blind field of its real as well as fictional existence, a blind field which it can draw into its own inclusive structure, by montage, by cutting, by allowing extratextual interjections continuous with its own life. A work is the part it plays in existence, in existences. We do not set out to *conserve* Keats or Lamartine; that is an accusative act; libraries would be no better than zoos if that were so. Translation works to ensure a constant process of re-integration and re-relating, so that Keats and Lamartine vie for presence with today's edition of the daily paper, or the distractive meowing of a cat. To translate a work is to translate it (no, You) into new conditions of being and becoming.

4 Translating the first stanza of Verlaine's "En sourdine"

A translation of convergence, of converging meaning, will tend to average meaning, in order to facilitate approximation. A hermeneutic translation will assume that the text is possessed, that we have finished reading it, and will therefore be recapitulative rather than generative. For us, however, reading is not absorbing the text but setting it in motion, and it is so because we favour a translation of divergence in which self-differentiating languages try, in relation to the translation's shared subject, to explore its parameters, its idiolectal capacities. And this last grows from translation's invitation to the reader to let associative mechanisms express themselves in multi-medial interferences, graphic, chromatic, musical. Where Steiner imagines translation's involving an expansion of text through "explication",¹⁰ we invite expansion through multisensory and multi-

10 "Thus the mechanics of translation are primarily explicative, they explicate (or, strictly speaking, 'explicate') and make graphic as much as they can of the semantic inherence of the original. [...] Because explication is additive, because it does not merely restate the original unit but must create for it an illustrative context, a field of actualized and perceptible ramification, translations are inflationary" (Steiner 1975: 277; 1998: 291).

medial means, in order to keep the idiolectal and the paralinguistic vivid, immediate, detailed; we simply shift the inflationary source from elucidated inherence to readerly input. In translating the first stanza of Verlaine's "En sourdine":

En sourdine

Calmes dans le demi-jour	2' > 5
Que les branches hautes font,	3 > 2 > 2
Pénétrons bien notre amour	4 > 3
De ce silence profond.	4 > 3

[Note: the apostrophe in the syllabic tabulation indicates a *coupe lyrique* (measure-boundary *after* the word-terminal *e atone*: "Calmes/ dans le demi-jour") rather than the more frequent *coupe enjambante* (measure-boundary *before* the word-terminal *e atone*: "Cal/ mes dans le demi-jour").]

Muted

Calm

in the half

light

Cast

by the high branches

Let us

let

this deep silence

Infiltrate

our love

to its very quick

we might think that, on the face of it, in the two versions, the same initial word is being used: "calm" < OF *calme* < OI *calma* < LL *cauma* < Gk *kauma*. But compare /kalm(ə)/ with /kɑ:m/: the French has a short front /a/ rather than a long back /ɑ:/, a transitional liquid /l/, a self-dissipating second syllable /ə/ (unless elided), making possible a *coupe enjambante* or a *coupe lyrique*, a plural form, as here, which multiplies the possible colourings of calmness. Without a bilingual awareness, we would catch none of this rich divergence in the ostensibly similar. The English /kɑ:m/ then goes on to establish its even stillness, its unison, in /hɑ:f/, /kɑ:st/, /brɑ:n-tʃɛz/. The French /a/ has no such echoes, or rather echoes only of

a graphemic kind—“branches” (/bRɑ̃ʃ(ə)/), “hautes” (/’ot(ə)/)—which leave all in acoustic turmoil, until it finds its way home in /amuR/. The /l/ of “love” which had first found its voice in “light”, after two tacit or latent appearances in “Calm” and “half”, then gathers momentum in lines 3-4: “let” (bis), “silence”, “Infiltrate”, “love”, supported by an intensification of /l/ (“this”, “Infiltrate”, “its”, “quick”), itself a “penetrative” modulation, or single-vowel resolution, of /ai/ (“light”, “high”, “silence”), a diphthong which glides towards it, from open to close.

The French stanza is four heptasyllables, a *vers impair*, which, lying between hexasyllable and octosyllable creates a certain syllabic *brouillage* and a greater uncertainty about accentual articulation. But the stanza finds its way to a 4 > 3 regularity as intention makes itself felt. The English version takes the twenty-eight syllables of the French and re-distributes them in four lines of gradual syllabic increase: 5 > 6 > 7 > 10, but with a tabular layout. Rhythmically, its momentum is set by a stressed monosyllable followed by an ionic (“in the half light”—stress is maintained in “light” by avoiding hyphenation (“half-light”)). In the second line, the ionic is extended by a final weak syllable (“in the high branches”). In the third line, the ionic modulates into an antispast (x / / x: “this deep silence”) and finally back to an ionic with inserted weak syllable (x x / x /: “to its very quick”). To suggest that the antispast is a modulation of the ionic rather than a reversed form of the choriamb (/ x x /) is not only to make it significant as part of a serial development, but also to suggest that the ionic, which favours prepositional phrases (prep. + art. + monosyllabic adj. + monosyllabic noun), can cast off its adverbial circumstantiality and become something indrawn, and inwardly pervasive. None of this is about what the poem means; it is about what the poem releases in terms of senses, of semantic energies, of a sense-generating dynamic.

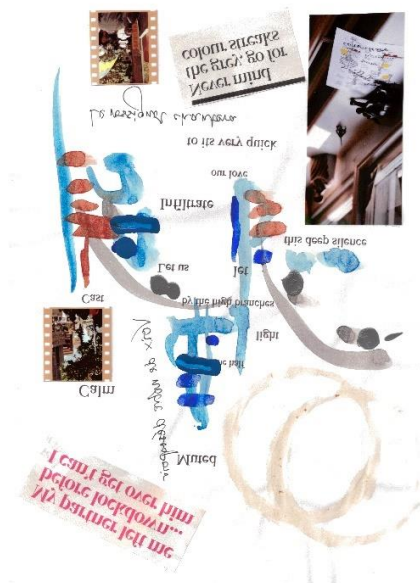


Fig. 1

In my further development of the translation (Fig. 1), I have produced a text now interfered with by a collage of photographic fragments (contact prints, cropped photo) and newsprint headlines, by two coffee-cup stains and by a design in watercolours and enamel paints roughly sketching in two figures facing each other at the base of a structure both converging and diverging. Additionally, handwritten into the text are the last two lines of the French poem: “Voix de notre désespoir,/Le rossignol chantera” [Voice of our despair/The nightingale will sing]. The collaged and handwritten elements are designed to act deflectively, to take the text out of itself, or at least to ensure that the reader’s field of consciousness is not limited to the text itself. The text still has priority: the page is, after all, primarily the page of the text. But that page is now inhabited by a larger number of temporalities and spaces than the text originally imagined for itself. Do the items added to the text have relevance for it? Yes, they do, in the sense that the text is made subject to the activities (presumably at different times) of a respon-

sive subjecthood, of (a) reading and re-reading subject(s), of (a) self-inscribing imagination(s). But while some of these items may seem directly to concern, to modify, to contradict the senses generated by the text, others—the photographs in particular—seem to compete with the text as an object in the world and ask us what place it occupies in relation to other events in the reader’s consciousness. Translation, in this respect, challenges the conditions demanded by the literary/artistic object—exclusive claim to attention, undisturbed and pondered assimilation, autonomy in the exercise of effects—all of which might produce a protected and insulated aesthetic experience. Translation translates the literary text into a distributed object, into an object of trade between languages, into an object looking for a role in lives and environments, an object more active, more diverse in its being, for being more challenged yet freer to express itself.

5 Conclusion

Steiner’s attitudes to translation turn out to be surprisingly negative: in all but exceptional circumstances (e. g. Rilke’s translations of Louise Labé), translation inevitably entails loss; there is no access to a text’s total semanticity: “All discourse, all interpretation of discourse works at a word-for-word and sentence-for-sentence level. There is no privileged access to underlying totality” (Steiner 1975: 294; ³1998: 309f.); conversely, “there is no conceivable way of demonstrating perfect homology” (Steiner 1975: 250; ³1998: 263); theoretical writing about translation is remarkable by its paucity; no theory of translation, no “unitary scheme” or “systematic model”, no theory for “*all* meaningful exchanges”, is viable, leaving us to fall back on multiple, heterogeneous descriptions of *praxis*; each language defends its own idiolectal opacity, its own “tenacious quiddity”, by affirming untranslatability (Steiner 1975: 285; ³1998: 300).¹¹ Why does Steiner make things so difficult for himself? Why

11 To let this national “idiolect” cross a frontier, in an act of sympathetic translation, is, for Steiner, tantamount to treason: “But in this sense also there

insist on the narrow embattledness of a *theory* when the exploratory tolerances of a *philosophy* would suit his probing speculations so much better? Part of the answer to that question lies in his continuing to work within a monoglot vision of translation and its function, when his own sympathies are so clearly polyglot. Another part is Steiner's viewing translation as exemplifying, as paying the price for, the tangle of issues that emerge from the practice of language, rather than offering a radical way out of such quandaries; Steiner observes: "As we have seen, translation offers a critical ground on which to test the issues" [here of universalism and relativism] (Steiner 1975: 238; ³1998: 250). For me, translation does not live out the consequences of linguistic contradictions; it is, instead, an *originating* practice of language which suggests ways of outwitting those polarized positions that so beset Steiner. I ask what kinds of corridor of creative opportunity translation opens up, what kind of existential adventure in language translation is, for the translating subject. It is in translation that language rediscovers the true range of what Mallarmé would call its virtuality: "le dire, [...], retrouve chez le Poète, par nécessité constitutive d'un art consacré aux fictions, sa virtualité" (Mallarmé 2003: 213) [utterance, [...], recovers in the Poet, by that necessity which constitutes an art dedicated to fictions, its virtuality]. And what Mallarmé calls "virtuality", Steiner himself, as we have seen, calls "alterity". To ask "Can we formulate a theory of translation?" seems to me no more than a blind alley; we should instead be asking how texts can best be made the subjects of a process (translation) whereby, released from the confinement of *langue* into the free exchange of *langage*, they can explore themselves, their invisibilities, their variants/variations, their reconfigurabilities, in the service of readerly idiolects, readerly subjecthoods.

is in every act of translation—and specially where it succeeds—a touch of treason. Hoarded dreams, patents of life are being taken across the frontier" (Steiner 1975: 233; ³1998: 244). Jealously to guard the privacy of privacy, rather than to allow multiple participations in multiple privacies, seems to me an unregenerate position.

In Steiner's analysis of Posthumus's monologue in Act II of *Cymbeline*, little attention is paid to the verse, to its formal, dispositional shaping of expression. I am looking for a translation in which analysis of performing form, of the dynamic of sense-generation, plays a more concerted role, with the result that the text more pointedly allows the reader to find his/her unique place in the text and commits itself to a never-ending, shape-shifting self-multiplication. Let us remember: translation is not some special professional occupation; it is simply the reader's writing of him/herself into the text he/she reads, so that the text bears the reader/translator's idiolectal imprint, so that, written into the TT and in the spirit of the vocative, is a communication with the text the reader is translating. This article does scant justice to the complexity and breadth of Steiner's arguments, to his wealth of example, to the rich profusion of his thinking, which we will ever celebrate. It wants merely to suggest that Steiner's attribution of a hermeneutic function to translation cuts him off from the proper expression, in translation, of linguistic values he lays so much store by, values which my non-hermeneutic model seeks to restore.

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