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The Gadamerian Legacy
in George Steiner’s Philosophy
of Internal Translation

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

Marco Agnetta

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“Understanding as Translation”: The Gadamerian Legacy in George Steiner’s Philosophy of Internal Translation

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Abstract: This essay investigates the similarities between Steiner’s and Gadamer’s views on “understanding as translation”, since both thinkers were particularly interested in the case of so-called *translation-from-within*. The main aim of this essay, however, is not to discuss how Gadamer and Steiner addressed the problem of translation *per se*. Instead, by starting with the assumption that, for both thinkers, translation serves as a category to depict the complexities of understanding, my objective is to demonstrate how similar their ideas are concerning factors which either revolve around the act of understanding (circularity), or determine its specificity (historicity). My analysis shows that both Gadamer and Steiner devoted much attention to the impact of history on a human being’s interpretation of certain fragments of reality and to the dialogical interaction with texts (broadly understood), this being a specific form of hermeneutic conversation which proceeds according to the interpretive circularity specific to the hermeneutic tradition. The connection between Gadamerian and Steinerian thought may serve as an important clue to the understanding of the philosophical systems of the two thinkers, in particular their views on translation characterized as the act of intralingual communication, an issue which still remains significantly understudied. These findings may also prove useful for the development of translation theory, especially its hermeneutic dimension.

Keywords: Intralingual Translation, George Steiner, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hermeneutic Circle, Dialogue, Effective History.

No problem is as completely concordant with literature
and with the modest mystery of language
as is the problem posed by a translation.
(Steiner 1975: xi)

1 Introduction

George Steiner has been referred to as the main representative of the hermeneutic approach to translation by many scholars (cf., e. g., Chatterjee 2009: 12f.; Munday 2016: 250ff.). The importance of this author's *oeuvre* for the development of translation theory should not be underestimated. What might be surprising, however, is the fact that contemporary translation studies discourse, when discussing the hermeneutic approach, places emphasis on Steiner's contribution, and in particular on his concept of the hermeneutic motion, more than on any other translation scholar interested in the relationship between hermeneutics and translation – an emphasis that has simultaneously entailed neglecting and underrating the work of other authors (for example of Fritz Paepcke's, Radegundis Stolze's, Larisa Cercel's, Brian O'Keeffe's and Douglas Robinson's), all of whom contribute to the developing field of translational hermeneutics to a greater extent and with greater success than Steiner. And while this opinion merits elaboration and more detailed discussions in terms of the state of the art (otherwise it is highly subjective), this matter is not a topic addressed by the present essay, and thus should only be viewed as an initial diagnosis of how Steiner has so far been viewed by the community of translation scholars, in particular by the authors of Anglo-Saxon publications pertaining to translation. To provide a few examples, Chatterjee (2009: 12) describes Steiner's theory as "[t]he next major development towards a new theoretical approach to translation, a target-oriented hermeneutic approach"; Munday, referring to *After Babel* as "hugely influential", names Steiner's contribution "the key modern reference for the hermeneutics of translation" (2016: 251); Hatim and

Munday refer to Steiner's contribution to translation theory as "one of the classics of modern translation theory" (Hatim/Munday 2004: 132). It is worth noting that such references are placed either in influential textbooks designed for translation students, or in prestigious encyclopaedias used mainly by professionals – that is, in publications whose impact on the development and perception of the discipline of translation studies cannot be underestimated, since they shape and determine to a great extent the perspectives of contemporary translational hermeneutics, especially in relation to its roots and main characteristics.

Steiner's views on translation have already been approached from different perspectives (cf., e. g., Kharmandar 2018; Agnetta/Cercel 2019; Drößiger 2020). However, to the best of my knowledge, no single study exists which analyses in a more detailed way the impact that Gadamerian hermeneutics exerted on Steiner's approach to the phenomenon of translation. Gadamer's *opus magnum*, *Wahrheit und Methode* was published in 1960, and thus it is legitimate to claim that Steiner was acquainted with and influenced by this work: traces of this inspiration can be identified in the first chapter of *After Babel* in particular. As Hermans (2009: 132) rightly notes, "[m]ore than any other writer on hermeneutics Gadamer has influenced theorists and critics of translation, notably George Steiner". Nonetheless, no work has so far touched upon the specificity of this impact and its manifestations in Steiner's well-known work.

The main objective of this essay, then, is to fill this research gap by exploring traces of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics in connection with Steiner's view of *understanding as translation*. By referring mainly to the first chapter of Steiner's *opus vitae*, i. e. *After Babel*, a section wholly dedicated to *understanding as translation*¹, I in-

1 This chapter was selected for a closer analysis because this particular section, as compared with the others, contains a large number of associations with Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics. Almost the whole first chapter in *After Babel* revolves around two important aspects, which are also worthy of note in Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Method*, namely, understanding a given work in its circular dimension, and history and its impact on language and human experience, including the act of reading. Also, this first chapter of Steiner's *opus magnum*, as compared to the other sections of the work, contains a

tend to demonstrate how Steiner's "philosophy of translation" intersects in many ways with Gadamer's philosophical model of human beings' functioning in the world. In order to assess this analogy, I discuss the following categories: the realization of the hermeneutic circle in terms of the dialectics of question and answer, and the concretization of effective history². The above-mentioned concepts are indicative of the specificity of Gadamer's views on understanding, and also, albeit indirectly, on translation, where renditions are considered mostly in intralingual terms and are treated as interpretive acts consisting in negotiating and mediating meaning—meaning which is always determined by the influence of history on people and, moreover, a human being's situated positioning within the world. The discussion which follows is organised around these themes in the following way: in each section, having presented the main tenets of Gadamerian hermeneutic philosophy in terms of the two main aspects mentioned above, I proceed to include Steiner's vision of these similar aspects. My intention in this essay is to focus only on similarities³ between Gadamerian and Steinerian thought, mainly because the common points between the two philosophies, it seems, have not been sufficiently assessed—either in the literature on translation theory, or in the philosophical literature. While certain differences between the authors in terms of their views on language and translation do exist, these are not the subject matter of the present undertaking.

This essay comprises two main parts followed by a summary and concluding remarks. The first part discusses translation as the

plethora of remarks pertaining to the so-called *translation from within* (or, as Steiner himself called it, *internal translation*), which also stood at the centre of Gadamerian philosophy of language and understanding.

- 2 This categorization is based on the typology I developed for my analysis of the Gadamerian act of translation and which is described in my monograph *Rozumienie, dzieje, dialog. Kompetencje tłumacza w hermeneutyce filozoficznej Hansa-Georga Gadamera* [Understanding, history, dialogue. A translator's competence in Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics] (Piecychna 2019).
- 3 The similarities, though, should be understood as rather subtle and nuanced since both philosophers use different terms and different metaphors to express their point of view.

realization of the hermeneutic circle in respect of the dialectics of question and answer and examines the specific embodiment of the hermeneutic dialogue as the manifestation of the translation process. The second section pertains to the notion of history and its impact on the interpreting process. The reasoning behind the logic of this article capitalizes on both the Gadamerian and Steinerian claim that translation is an intralingual act of communication, this being an indispensable element of any attempt to understand anything and to communicate with other people. In *After Babel*, one finds the following influential statement: "Thus a human being performs an act of translation, in the full sense of the word, when receiving a speech-message from any other human being" (Steiner 1975: 47). Steiner adds that this process is difficult due to the impact of "time, distance, disparities" (ibid.). Likewise, as Gadamer explained in his text *Rhetorik, Hermeneutik und Ideologiekritik. Metakritische Erörterungen zu »Wahrheit und Methode«*: „So lag es nahe, das vielschichtige Problem der Übersetzung zum Modell der Sprachlichkeit des menschlichen Weltverhaltens zu erheben und an den Strukturen von Übersetzung das allgemeine Problem zu entwickeln wie Fremdes zu eigen wird" (Gadamer 1986: 232). Gadamer clearly articulates what his intention was while writing *Wahrheit und Methode*: the phenomenon of translation is not only universalized (as it relates to common human experiences in terms of their having to function linguistically in the world and attempting to understand the Other), but also anthropologized (since the nature of the phenomenon pertains to experiences specific to all people). A similar stance can be found in *After Babel*:

When we read or hear any language-statement from the past, be it Leviticus or last year's best-seller, we translate. Reader, actor, editor are translators of language out of time. The schematic model of translation is one in which a message from a source-language passes into a receptor-language via a transformational process. The barrier is the obvious fact that one language differs from the other, that an interpretative transfer, sometimes, albeit misleadingly, described as encoding and decoding, must occur so that the message 'gets through'. Exactly the same model—and this is what is rarely stressed—is operative within a single language. But here the barrier or distance between source and receptor is time. (Steiner 1975: 28)

Every reader, then, is considered by Steiner to be an internal translator, who, very much like the bilingual (or external) translator, needs to deal with more or less similar interpreting problems caused by otherness:

I have been trying to state a rudimentary but decisive point: interlingual translation is the main concern of this book, but it is also a way in, an access to an inquiry into language itself. 'Translation', properly understood, is a special case of the arc of communication which every successful speech-act closes within a given language. On the inter-lingual level, translation will pose concentrated, visibly intractable problems; but these same problems abound, at a more covert or conventionally neglected level, intra-lingually. The model 'sender to receiver' which re-presents any semiological and semantic process is ontologically equivalent to the model 'source-language to receptor-language' used in the theory of translation. In both schemes there is 'in the middle' an operation of interpretative decipherment, an encoding-decoding function or synapse. Where two or more languages are in articulate interconnection, the barriers in the middle will obviously be more salient, and the enterprise of intelligibility more conscious. But the 'motions of spirit', to use Dante's phrase, are rigorously analogous. So, as we shall see, are the most frequent causes of misunderstanding or, what is the same, of failure to translate correctly. In short: *inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*⁴. (Steiner 1975: 47)

For both Gadamer and Steiner, one of the key factors responsible for creating such otherness is *time*, and this can be approached by the interpreter by way of the dialectics of question and answer, an act of interpretation which is usually actualized during the process of *reading*. Therefore, this analysis relies on two main categories: the realization of the hermeneutic circle as an implementation of the dialectics of question and answer, and effective history. Obviously, more common features between Gadamerian and Steinerian philosophical investigations can be discussed; however, my focus is on categories which can be associated with the act of interpretation and which confirm the general idea of *understanding as translation*. The main aim of this essay is therefore not to discuss how Gadamer and Steiner addressed the problem of translation *per se*. Instead, by starting with the assumption that, for both thinkers, translation serves

4 This approach to translation was later confirmed by Steiner in, for example, his text "Translation as *conditio humana*" (Steiner 2004).

as a way to depict the complexities of understanding, my objective is to demonstrate how similar their ideas are regarding factors which either illustrate the act of understanding (circularity), or determine its specificity (history).

2 (Internal) translation as the realization of the hermeneutic circle

Understanding, in philosophy, is the supreme principle both ontologically and epistemologically. However, in Gadamerian hermeneutics⁵, that concept is not subject to simple categorizations and classifications because of the multidimensionality of functions that the concept of understanding fulfills in Gadamer's philosophy. As Bronk (1988: 123) underlines, understanding here covers the "universal model of being" of every human being, and so it is not just a methodological activity in a given context. It also includes a practical aspect, which can be narrowed down to knowledge of a given discipline. This is why sometimes such an understanding of the term *understanding* is associated with *cognition*. For this reason, from the hermeneutic perspective, the act of internal translation, which is itself a specific manifestation of anthropological activities, can be considered a unique act of cognition during which rendering a message takes place, but also the broadening of the translator's competence.

The hermeneutic circle in Gadamerian philosophy fully reflects what internal translation entails. The translational (interpreting) process involves discovering the sense of the text on the basis of single parts available to the reader, and those single parts on the basis of the whole, i. e., the historicity of the text, its embedding in tradition and socio-cultural circumstances. In harmony with Gadamer's idea of the hermeneutic circle, one can distinguish the fol-

5 My remarks concerning Gadamer's concepts of the hermeneutic circle and the dialectics of question and answer are based on considerations from sub-chapters of my book *Rozumienie, dzieje, język. Kompetencje tłumacza w hermeneutyce filozoficznej Hansa-Georga Gadamera* (cf. Pieczychna 2019: 100–110, 183–188).

lowing stages of the interpreting process: 1) projecting (or anticipating) the sense of the text; 2) verifying initial assumptions; 3) confirming or rejecting those assumptions and potentially searching for further *fore projects* or initial hypotheses.

Gadamer (1986: 57) provides an interesting example of the realization of the structure of the hermeneutic circle by referring to the case of learning a foreign language. The learner often needs to understand the whole sentence before he/she is able to comprehend single lexical items forming such a sentence. This is because the learner has certain assumptions as to the whole of the message; in other words, he/she bases matters on the context available in a given case. Such an anticipation of the sense of the message, however, can be modified if need be. This is concordant with the process of internal translation, where the translator needs to start with a projection of the initial sense of the text. The initial projections must be then verified and, in some cases, modified. The understanding of the text is always influenced by the anticipation of its sense. The structure of the hermeneutic circle is a useful concept because it specifies how understanding is ever possible (cf. Gadamer 1965: 277). The hermeneutic circle is accordingly of both an analytical and synthetic nature. However, let us stress, the translator understands because he/she has certain expectations towards the meaning of a text.

Effective understanding, so to speak, takes place thanks to the initial grasping of the meaning of a text: this is referred to by Gadamer (1986: 61) as *Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit*, and it is closely connected with the idea of *foreunderstanding*. We understand that which has the whole unity of sense, and the whole unity of sense is directed by our initial projections as to the meaning of a text. When the interpreter grasps the wholeness of the text, he/she automatically assumes that the message he/she intends to understand forms a semantic-thematic unity, has sense in it and some purpose:

Der Vorgriff der Vollkommenheit, der all unser Verstehen leitet, erweist sich so selber als ein jeweils inhaltlich bestimmter. Es wird nicht nur eine immanente Sinneinheit vorausgesetzt, die dem Lesenden die Führung gibt, sondern das Verständnis des Lesers wird auch ständig von transzendenten Sinn-erwartungen geleitet, die aus dem Verhältnis zur Wahrheit des Gemeinten

entspringen. So wie der Empfänger eines Briefes die Nachrichten versteht, die er enthält, und zunächst die Dinge mit den Augen des Briefschreibers sieht, d. h. für wahr hält, was dieser schreibt – und nicht etwa die Meinung des Briefschreibers als solche zu verstehen sucht, so verstehen wir auch überlieferte Texte auf Grund von Sinnerwartungen, die aus unserem eigenen Sachverhältnis geschöpft sind. (Gadamer 1986: 62)

The anticipation of the meaning of a text can be considered a *primary forejudgment*. As Bronk (1988: 255) has rightly claimed, the moment of the forejudgment of wholeness comprises not just a component of a formal nature (the assumption that a text reveals that which it pertains to holistically), but also the conviction that what the text is about is true. The anticipation of the meaning of a text is also indicative of the specificity of the act of translation, according to Gadamer: “Übersetzen ist eine unlösbare Einheit von implizitem Antizipieren, den Sinn im Ganzen Vorweggreifen, und explizitem Festlegen des so Vorwegnehmens und des Festlegens” (Gadamer 1986: 205).

At the risk of travesty of Gadamer's words, one can perhaps say that the process of internal translation is like “das Gespräch ein in die Dialektik von Frage und Antwort geschlossener Kreis” (Gadamer 1965: 366). The philosopher intends to draw our attention to the fact that interpreting is a hermeneutic dialogue which starts by considering the difference between the text, which itself is a partner in the hermeneutic conversation, and the interpreting self. According to the main tenets of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics, an integral element of every hermeneutic dialogue is the structure of the question. Such a hermeneutic dialogue is relevant in this context because it allows the interpreter to verify his/her initial forejudgments concerning a given interpreting situation. As Gadamer (1967: 54) puts it, every statement arises from something, and every statement contains assumptions which are discovered somewhat gradually.

The issue of the question is very important in Gadamerian philosophy. The question, Gadamer claims, has sense, i. e., directness. The sense of the question leads to establishing specific signs determining the answer. This is because asking a question directs the interpreter to the content to which the question refers: “Das

Aufkommen einer Frage bricht gleichsam das Sein des Befragten auf" (Gadamer 1965: 345). According to Gadamer, the asking of the right question is a dimension determining the interpreter's competence because to know what type of question to ask in a given situation is more difficult than giving an answer to the question:

Um fragen zu können, muß man wissen wollen, d. h. aber: wissen, daß man nicht weiß. In der komödienhaften Vertauschung von Fragen und Antworten, Wissen und Nichtwissen, die Plato uns schildert, kommt mithin die *Vorgängigkeit der Frage* für alles sacherschließende Erkennen und Reden zur Anerkennung. Ein Reden, das eine Sache aufschließen soll, bedarf des Aufbrechens der Sache durch die Frage. (Gadamer 1965: 345)

Gadamerian philosophy pinpoints the fact that the status of the structure of question is open. Hence the answer is always non-determined and non-specified, and this is itself indicative of the sense of questioning anything. Without such an open space of answers there can be no reliable questions. On the one hand, then, answers are nonspecific, on the other hand, though, they should be limited by the horizon. As Gadamer claims, the question needs to be posed, and it needs to relate to a concrete issue. Questions, as we have seen, are closely connected with the sense of the message: "Sinn ist eben stets Richtungssinn einer möglichen Frage. Der Sinn dessen, was richtig ist, muß der von einer Frage gebahnten Richtung entsprechen" (Gadamer 1965: 346).

Asking questions, for Gadamer, means that the question should elicit both the correctness of a particular statements and the exclusion of its incorrectness. Therefore, asking questions is here closely connected with the process of acquiring knowledge, as if obtaining an answer to a question furthers our steps along the road to knowledge. However, as Gadamer (*ibid.*) explains, the process of obtaining the answer is still far from being full cognition, since that takes place only after eliminating contradictory exemplifications and after demonstrating the incorrectness and unreliability of counterarguments. One can even say that, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, to possess knowledge means to possess questions which do not lead to simple answers. The process of asking questions should also be accompanied by the internal translator's awareness

that initial judgments to which he/she refers when dealing with the text are of a hypothetical nature, and in order to verify them in the right way, the internal translator needs to ask a proper question. According to Gadamer, a specific unawareness leads to a specific question.

In Gadamerian hermeneutics the question assumes both a natural character (when it resembles *having an idea*) and methodological dimensions inasmuch as there exists an art of questioning, in particular during the process of comprehending and reading – an art which comprises a set of rules the mastery of which can guarantee the furtherance of knowledge. The structure of question includes every idea which comes to mind in the form of the interpreter's initial judgments. Questions, then, allows for the creation of new ideas and for the opening to the idea of the text:

Die hermeneutische Aufgabe geht von selbst in eine sachliche Fragestellung über und ist von dieser immer schon mitbestimmt. Damit gewinnt das hermeneutische Unternehmen festen Boden unter den Füßen. Wer verstehen will, wird sich von vornherein nicht der Zufälligkeit der eigenen Vormeinung überlassen dürfen, um an der Meinung des Textes so konsequent und hartnäckig wie möglich vorbeizuhören – bis etwa diese unüberhörbar wird und das vermeintliche Verständnis umstößt. Wer einen Text verstehen will, ist vielmehr bereit, sich von ihm etwas sagen zu lassen. (Gadamer 1965: 253)

This predilection for the process of reading as it aims to understand otherness is also present in Steiner's theory delineated at the beginning of *After Babel*: "But only close reading will exhibit the details and manifold energies at work" (Steiner 1975: 2). Such a reading of a text in one's own language, as Steiner recommends (cf. *ibid.*: 5), should also start with asking certain questions – by, for instance, analyzing lexis and compiling a specific glossary –, and be followed by consideration of the specificity of syntactic constructions: "Such a glossary, even if its lexical, historical elements aimed to be exhaustive, is only a preliminary move. A comprehensive reading would turn next to syntactic aspects of the passage" (*ibid.*: 5). The close analysis of the author's lexical and syntactic means should be based on a recognition of the author's lifetime and hence on when that work was published. These reflections can be associated with Gadamerian idea of the hermeneutic circle in which the process of

internal translation starts with particulars in order to relate them to the whole of the message, or just the opposite – as when one moves from the wholeness of the text to its singular aspects. In this way, and as Steiner underlines when he refers to Shakespeare's plays, the interpreter is able to "establish, so far as he is able, the full intentional quality of Posthumous's monologue" (Steiner 1975: 5). Steiner, in accordance with Gadamer's postulates, does not attempt to recreate the author's *real* psychological intentions, but instead to connect the author's objectives when that work was being created to the specificity of the historical period during which the work came to fruition. Therefore, Steiner turns to the hermeneutic circle as the internal translator's method of dealing with the text when he suggests that the "intentional quality" of the Shakespearean play should be discovered "first within the play, secondly in what is known of Shakespearean and Elizabethan dramatic conventions, and, most difficult of all, within the large context of early seventeenth-century speech-habits" (ibid.: 5). Similar remarks are made in regards to Jane Austen's *oeuvre* as well. As with the Gadamerian figure of the hermeneutic circle, the interpreter (or internal translator), who is also regarded as a close reader, turns to particulars in order to return later to the larger context encompassing both a given author's as conventions well as all the other procedures and linguistic means deployed at a given time period. In this way, the validity of the process of interpretations can be achieved. Such "total operative context" (ibid.: 6) is relevant to a close reading, in particular when the internal translator's objective is also to read the character's internal intentions based on the proceedings of the play. According to Steiner, the deciphering of particular words and syntactic phrases is not sufficient for the discovery of certain intentional qualities behind a given work. Of note here is "tonality", i. e., "the cumulative effect of key words and turns of phrase which may have behind them and, as it were, immediately beneath their own surface" (ibid.: 10). This "tonality" can be interpreted as the larger context in which singular lexical and syntactic items are embedded.

In order to understand not only the external context of a given work, but also its internal complexities, the interpreter needs to

move "in concentric and ever-widening circles" (Steiner 1975: 7). Such an approach to the act of reading enables the internal translator to discover the semantic meaning behind not just individuals' actions and feelings, but also their relations with other protagonists. "From Posthumus Leonatus at the close of Act II, we proceed to *Cymbeline* as a whole, then to the body of Shakespearean drama and to the context of cultural reference and literature on which it draws" (ibid.: 7). In Steinerian terms, then, the act of internal translation resembles the Gadamerian interpretive cycle, where the process of deciphering sense is certainly indicative of the ever-evolving nature of the task. Steiner is of a similar opinion when he says that such "[a]n exercise in 'total reading' is also potentially unending" (ibid.: 8).

The traces of the Gadamerian rationale are also visible in Steiner's references to "pre-information", i. e., "prior material is required to understand a given message-unit" (Steiner 1975: 11). This "prior material" should comprise "necessary and sufficient context" (ibid.: 11) enabling the internal translator to read certain texts from the past. As in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, the reader who wants to understand a text needs to situate what is to be understood and interpreted within the framework of the already known, within this "prior material" guiding his/her steps through the text. Although Steiner underlines the significance of prior knowledge, and the broadening of general knowledge in a more conscious reader, he does not extrapolate this remark to the general reader, who, in Gadamerian terms, always approaches the text with some prejudgments. Steiner, in contrast to Gadamer, draws attention to the requirements that need to be fulfilled in order to partially understand a text coming from the past. In this respect, however, Steiner is close to Gadamer's dialectics of question and answer since the competent internal translator in Steiner's philosophy knows which questions to ask the text in order to position the message socially and historically. This stance can be clearly seen in Steiner's observation regarding the tools that the internal translator should have to hand in order to make an attempt at understanding a message: "the tools employed in both operations are correlate"

(Steiner 1975: 28). As far as the tools are concerned, they include: “lexica, historical grammars, glossaries of particular periods, professions, or social milieu, dictionaries of argot, manuals of technical terminology” (ibid.: 28). Such tools serve as a valid confirmation of the reliability of the “prior material” and of the internal translator’s prior knowledge concerning the text. They also allow for launching the hermeneutic dialogue wherein particular dictionaries or manuals are deemed relevant partners in the hermeneutic conversation between the internal translator and the message he/she tries to comprehend.

Traces of Gadamerian philosophy, in particular those relating to the philosopher’s treatment of the anticipation of wholeness, can be observed in chapter five of *After Babel*, which is devoted to the hermeneutic motion. For it is during the first stage of the whole procedure, as Steiner stresses, that the (internal) translator assumes that there is something in the text and that it is worthwhile rendering the message: “There is initiative trust, an investment of belief, underwritten by previous experience but epistemologically hazardous, in the meaningfulness [...] of the facing or, strictly speaking, adverse text” (Steiner 1975: 296). Of particular note is here the expression “previous experience”, since it denotes, like in Gadamerian hermeneutics as well, that the interpretive process is always guided by the interpreter’s prior encounter with the world:

All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust. This confiding will, ordinarily, be instantaneous and unexamined, but it has a complex base. It is an operative convention which derives from a sequence of phenomenological assumptions about the coherence of the world, about the presence of meaning in very different, perhaps formally antithetical semantic systems, about the validity of analogy and parallel. (Steiner 1975: 296)

The author of *After Babel* underscores the ubiquity of interpretation in respect of in every act of reading: “Any thorough reading of a text out of the past of one’s own language and literature is a manifold act of interpretation” (Steiner 1975: 17). However, this can only be done in the case of a conscious reader, namely he/she who knows how important this process of digging deeper into the structure of the text is. Most readers, though, as Steiner acknowledges,

do not take the act of reading seriously, and assume that the meaning of words used in the past is very similar to their contemporary semantic meaning. On the basis of Steiner's thoughts, however, one can draw the tentative conclusion that a reader who is not conscious of such problems in the act of interpreting cannot be referred to as the internal translator. Full, or thorough reading (or internal translation) entails taking into consideration the temporal and occasional dimension of the creation of a given work: "To read fully is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs" (ibid.: 24). Clearly, this statement bears resemblance to Gadamer's view on occasionality where an aspect of living speech pertaining to the specificity of lexical items' sense is always concretized in a specific context:

Es erhellt daraus, daß niemals eine Aussage ihren vollen Sinn-Gehalt in sich selber enthält. In der Logik hat man das lange als das Problem der Okkasionalität gekannt. Die sogenannten „okkasionellen“ Ausdrücke, die in jeder Sprache vorkommen, sind dadurch ausgezeichnet, daß sie ihren Sinn offenkundig nicht wie andere Ausdrücke in sich voll enthalten. Zum Beispiel, wenn ich sage „hier“. Was „hier“ ist, nicht dadurch, daß es gesagt wurde oder geschrieben steht, für jeden verständlich, sondern man muß wissen, wo das war oder wo das ist. „Hier“ erfordert für seine eigene Bedeutung die Ausfüllung durch die Gelegenheit, die *occasio*, bei der es gesagt wird. Die Ausdrücke dieser Art fanden deshalb das besondere Interesse der logisch-phänomenologischen Analyse, weil man an diesen Bedeutungen zeigen kann, daß sie die Situation und die Gelegenheit in ihren eigenen Bedeutungsgehalt einschließen. (Gadamer 1986: 195)

Steiner's remarks regarding the act of *translating-from-within* bear close resemblance to the Gadamerian geometric structure of the hermeneutic circle as a means deployed to understand a message full of difficult words and phrases, and this circularity of understanding, so specific as it is to every act of conscious reading, overlaps to a great extent with the concept of the historicity of interpretation, namely, of the embedding of the internal translator within the historical context that always connects both the past and the present. Given the importance of historicity, the next section of this essay is devoted to the relationship between history and understanding in both Gadamerian and Steinerian thought.

3 Effective history

Effective history⁶ (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is one of Gadamer's most principal categories. The notion of *effective history* is closely associated with people's functioning in the world. One can say, then, that this concept, like the hermeneutic circle as well, is of an anthropological and anthropologizing nature. In Gadamerian philosophy people are "thrown" into the mechanism of *effective history*—a history whose course people have no impact upon. The understanding of any cultural artefacts takes place entirely *through* and *in* history since people are always historically situated. Gadamer (1965: 267ff.) discusses the concept of *effective history* mainly with reference to the difference between the paradigm of the humanities and the paradigm of the so-called hard sciences and natural sciences; however, as the philosopher claims, the notion in question is relevant for both scientific cognition and self-cognition. Interestingly, Gadamer (1967: 5–10) underlines that *effective history* determines who man is. For, as he rightly claims, people's knowledge about themselves is proportional to their embedding in history. This leads to his conclusion that one can never achieve self-knowledge because human functioning is always determined historically (cf. Gadamer 1965: 288).

In accordance with the views specified above, one can say that the internal translator must not only take his/her embedding in a particular historical moment into consideration, but also reflect upon the historical distance dividing him/her from the work which he/she is reading. Gadamer (1965: 284ff.) attempts to prove that so-called objective cognition is never really possible. As Soltysiak (2004: 59) rightly observes, "in a philosophical sense effective history means for Gadamer the fact, albeit not fully made aware of, that we are the product of history and that all our existence is historically penetrated".

⁶ My remarks pertaining to Gadamer's concept of *effective history* derive from a discussion to be found in my article inspecting the historical determinants of the earliest Polish translation of Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables* (Piecychna 2021, forthcoming).

The notion of *effective history* is closely connected with the concept of historical awareness (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*). This speaks to the moment at which the internal translator becomes aware of his/her understanding of a particular phenomenon. As Gadamer (1965: 285) says, this moment can also be referred to as the awareness of a hermeneutical situation. Despite the fact that even when people have such an awareness and cannot achieve self-knowledge, the awareness of the impact of effective history allows for the noticing of the perspective from which a given problem is analyzed. In this respect, it is worth referring to a dichotomy of Jean Grondin. According to him, the notion comprises *genetivus obiectivus* and *genetivus subiectivus*, that is, the internal translator is aware of not only the existence of effective history, but also the fact that effective history determines his/her perception and understanding of the (historical) world (cf. Grondin 1982: 146, quoted after Soltysiak 2004: 60). Historical understanding is possible thanks to *horizon*, yet another Gadamerian concept (cf. 1965: 286ff.). According to Gadamer, *horizon* enables one to see something from a given perspective, allows access to those things which are situated far from us, and offers the possibility of asking appropriate questions in a particular hermeneutical situation: "Horizont ist der Gesichtskreis, der all das umfaßt und umschließt, was von einem Punkte aus sichtbar ist" (Gadamer 1965: 286). *Horizon* is an autonomous entity. However, it is subject to incessant movement enacted by the transmission of tradition. Thus, *horizon* covers the wholeness of human existence, including history and its impact on the creation of cultural artefacts (cf. *ibid.*: 287ff.). Nonetheless, as Gadamer (*ibid.*: 288ff.) emphasizes, the understanding of the past cannot be realized without its embedding in the present, and therefore Gadamer stresses the *fusion of horizons*, a concept which affords so-called historical understanding: "Vielmehr ist Verstehen immer der Vorgang der Verschmelzung solcher vermeintlich für sich seiender Horizonte" (*ibid.*: 289). For *horizon* makes it possible for the continuity of historical transmission to take place, and this leads to the existence of different historical moments. In other words, in the process of understanding historical texts, the present exists because of the past,

and the past exists because of the present. Therefore, one can say that historical understanding, in Gadamerian hermeneutics, is, in a way, a continuous actualization of the past.

Steiner is also cognizant of the importance of history for the act of interpretation: this is evident in his initial reflections on reading Shakespeare's works:

A first step would deal with the meaning of salient words—with what that meaning may have been in 1611, the probable date of the play. Already this is a difficult step, because current meaning may not have been, or have been only in part, Shakespeare's. In short how many of Shakespeare's contemporaries fully understood his text? An individual and a historical context are both germane. (Steiner 1975: 2)

These remarks are close to Gadamer's reflection upon the significance of taking into account the historical perspective from which the author approached his/her work, since it is evident that the meaning of a given word is totally dependent on the historical moment in which the word was uttered and deployed. Language is constantly evolving, and so is the meaning of the words we use on a regular basis. What is important here is that Steiner accentuates the significance of the two-fold nature of the context: the aspect of individuality and the aspect of historicity. The aspect of individuality merits further elaboration. Like Gadamer, Steiner also underlines the synchronic and diachronic individuation of language used by particular people and social groups: "Any body of language, spoken at the same time in a complex community, is in fact rifted by much subtler differentiations. These relate to social status, ideology, age, and sex" (Steiner 1975: 31ff.). In some cases, language is therefore untranslatable, particularly as regards concepts that were understood differently by various political groups throughout history: "In the idiom of fascism and communism, 'peace', 'freedom', 'progress', 'popular will' are as prominent as in the language of representative democracy. But they have their fiercely disparate meanings" (Steiner 1975: 34). Steiner thus indirectly notes the considerable impact of history and time on the possibilities and scope of the act of interpretation (and the act of internal translation).

Furthermore, as Steiner claims here, the very fact that we are the author's contemporaries does not automatically put us in a better position compared to those who come after us. Deciphering meaning poses difficulties for the internal translator because of the distance dividing the author and the reader, irrespective of how great the distance might be. The distance here is such an important barrier in the process of deciphering the meaning of the message that, according to Steiner, internal translation, due to the difficulties, becomes almost "intractable" (Steiner 1975: 34).

Taking history into account is very important for Steiner. When analyzing the figure of Posthumus Leonatus, Steiner clearly expresses his views on the significance of the historical context in the interpreting process. He is particularly sensitive to the "sphere of sensibility" (ibid.: 7), a domain which lies beneath the rationale for the shape of certain historical events and their outcomes. This is the domain which can hardly ever be deciphered by those who can only look at a particular temporal space from a distance.

We know little of internal history, of the changing proceedings of consciousness in a civilization. How do different cultures and historical epochs use language, how do they conventionalize or enact the manifold possible relations between word and object, between stated meaning and literal performance? What were the semantics of an Elizabethan discourse, and what evidence could we cite towards an answer? The distance between 'speech signals' and reality in, say, Biblical Hebrew or Japanese court poetry is not the same as in Jacobean English. But can we, with any confidence, chart these vital differences, or are our readings of Posthumus's invective, however scrupulous our lexical studies and editorial discriminations, bound to remain creative conjecture? (Steiner 1975: 7)

Steiner's doubts as to the interpreter's abilities to associate the said with the unsaid (albeit, visible to those from the distant past) are augmented by the fact that the context within which a given work is embedded cannot be limited by any means. As Steiner interestingly asks: where are the limits of the context to be included in the process of a close reading? Are we ever able to close the ever-widening cultural and historical circles that open up with every new work and with every interpretation of the work? "No aspect of Elizabethan and European culture is formally irrelevant to the

complete context of a Shakespearean passage. Explorations of semantic structure very soon raise the problem of infinite series” (Steiner 1975: 7). One can see here that, for Steiner, history is a powerful domain which determines the scope of cognition for those who attempt to interpret. History is powerful since no contextual limits can be established to enable completion of the act of interpretation: “History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense” (ibid.: 29).

The significance of history is emphasized in Steiner’s philosophy, just as it is in Gadamer’s thought. Reflecting upon language and its interconnectedness with human experience, Steiner writes: “Language is in perpetual change” (Steiner 1975: 17). And he adds:

It alters at every moment in perceived time. The sum of linguistic events is not only increased but qualified by each new event. If they occur in temporal sequence, no two statements are perfectly identical. Though homologous, they interact. When we think about language, the object of our reflection alters in the process (thus specialized or metalanguages may have considerable influence on the vulgate). In short: so far as we experience and ‘realize’ them in linear progression, time and language are intimately related: they move and the arrow is never in the same place. (Steiner 1975: 18)

How similar this statement is to Gadamer’s view of constant linguistic changes and its impact on society and societal values (cf. 1965: 425). For instance, Gadamer refers to the shifting meaning of the German word ‘Tugend’, which in the past meant virtue, honor, righteousness, moral conduct, or virginity. Nowadays, however, this lexical item is used rather ironically. Steiner also stresses that “[w]ords and values shift at bewildering speed” (Steiner 1975: 20), mirroring human experience and determining it. Human experience, articulated in language, is constantly retranslated and reinterpreted in the form of certain themes or motifs in the history of civilizations (cf. ibid.: 23). Certain human experiences belong to the same human dictionary which serves our remembrance of particular historical achievements. History determines how language perpetually changes and mirrors the specificity of particular civilizations, and history is constituted out of how such civilizational experiences are articulated at any given time. Steiner goes so far as to claim that “every language-act has a temporal determinant” (Steiner

1975: 24). Accordingly, very utterance and every portion of the text is subject to the impact exerted by historical circumstances: "A text is embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure" (ibid.: 24). But it is not just texts that are embedded in such historical structures. Every human being who is making an attempt to understand those portions of texts which come from the distant past are subject to "the process of diachronic translation inside one's own native tongue" (ibid.: 29).

This process of "diachronic translation" is, as Gadamer also underlines, determined by the past, which is by no means objective, but which is instead a conglomerate of both objective and subjective factors. One has to regard matters in this way so as to allow for the fusion of horizons. As Steiner puts it, "[w]e remember culturally, as we do individually, by conventions of emphasis, foreshortening, and omission. The landscape composed by the past tense, the semantic organization of remembrance, is stylized and differently coded by different cultures" (Steiner 1975: 29). Each views his/her reality according to the historical horizon within which that person is placed: "each reading, each translation differs, each is undertaken from a distinctive angle of vision" (ibid.: 29). Such different readings are referred to by Steiner as "retranslations" dependent on the mentality of a given generation (ibid.). Moreover, this internal translation, which manifests itself in the form of manifold readings of the past, makes it possible for culture and civilization to exist.

4 Summary and concluding remarks

George Steiner's *After Babel* comprises not only a hugely influential translation theory, often referred to as a representation and manifestation of the early stages of what some now call translational hermeneutics, but also a collection of ideas which can be described as Gadamer-specific or Gadamer-oriented. Steiner's thoughts, in particular those concerning the act of understanding and translation, are similar to those of Gadamer not only in terms of the content, but also because of the high level of erudition, deep knowledge of

the philosophy of language and the arts, and sensitivity to translation as a uniquely human phenomenon. Steiner's well-known work, besides displaying many features comparable to Gadamer's outlook on the human being's linguistic functioning in the world, also displays a mastery of the English language that is comparable to Gadamer's mastery of the German language.

In *After Babel*, we can detect the gradual evolution of Steiner's approach to translation as he begins with the act of translation considered as a uniquely human phenomenon (in this regard this is much like Jakobson's intralingual translation), then proceeds to assess the translator's engagement with the text (this involves interlingual aspects strengthened by concrete examples) and finally to a discussion of translation in terms of culture (relevant here are the intersemiotic implications). While the Jakobsonian legacy is clearly present, and this presence warrants further research, I suggest, the purpose of the present essay has been to discuss the presence of Gadamer in *After Babel*. Insofar as both Steiner and Gadamer share an approach to the hermeneutic circle, the dialectics of question and answer, and a view of the importance of history and context, then we can, I argue, arrive at the tentative conclusion which proposes that Steiner's theory of translation, like Gadamer's theory of understanding, is of an anthropological and anthropologizing character. A key role in the two approaches is performed by the translator—he/she who fulfills multiple functions: that of a communicator, a mediator, a second author, a negotiator, an interpreter, but above all that of being a full, thorough reader who is engaged in the dialectics of question and answer and who is in dialogue with the circumstance of history itself. Both thinkers also underline the ubiquity of translation, which for Gadamer becomes the model for people's linguistic functioning in the world and engagement with otherness, and which for Steiner, given "the affair at Babel" (Steiner 1975: 48), characterizes a universal act of reading and interpreting especially in respect to more difficult works, often works from the distant past. Significantly, both philosophers highlight the importance of the unsaid in any act of communication. It seems that there is no hermeneutics without the unsaid—Gadamer was acutely

aware of this. The role of the internal translator is sometimes to disclose what is hidden, and sometimes to leave what is not revealed intact. Likewise, Steiner claims that the act of communication is realized not only to communicate, but also to “conceal, to leave unspoken” (Steiner 1975: 46).

Obviously, as I acknowledged at the outset of this essay, the similarities discussed in this essay by no means exclude the differences between Gadamer's and Steiner's discussion of internal translation. Thus, one can say that while Gadamer's reflections are more of an abstract nature, since he clearly attempts to extract hermeneutic rules which can be applied to general human functioning in the world, Steiner's views on the concept of internal translation are, to a greater extent than in Gadamer, intermingled with assessments of interlingual (or external) and intersemiotic translation. Such differences certainly do merit further discussion in future research into the relationship between Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics and Steiner's views on language and translation.

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