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George Steiner (1929–2020):
The End of an Era?

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

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[eds.]

1/2021

**Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics
Jahrbuch für Übersetzungshermeneutik**

Journal of the Research Center
Zeitschrift des Forschungszentrums



Hermeneutics and Creativity, University of Leipzig
Hermeneutik und Kreativität, Universität Leipzig

DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi1.28



Cite this article:

Robinson, Douglas (2021): „George Steiner (1929–2020): The End of an Era?“ In: *Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics* 1, pp. 325–333.
DOI: <10.52116/yth.vi1.28>.



Yearbook of Translational Hermeneutics 1/2021
ISSN: 2748-8160 | DOI: 10.52116/yth.vi1.28

George Steiner (1929–2020): The End of an Era

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There are, I suppose, always signs around us that an era is ending, that another one is beginning, and so on—that there is some kind of meaningful discontinuity to the transitions that we are always experiencing. We are inveterate narrativizers of our lives and times. That impulse is the stimulus that produces not only historiography and arguably all other intellectual labor as well but the “I” itself, the narrating self. We “are” (i. e., seem to ourselves and others like) “coherent” selves because we so obsessively turn our moment-to-moment experiences into stories with beginnings, middles, and ends.

I write this on the day the term of the first would-be fascist president of my country ends. All around me, everywhere in the world, COVID-19 still rages, and we all worry that we will never travel freely again. There are, in other words—always—plenty of pressing reasons to identify the present moment as the end of an era.

But for me personally the death of George Steiner on February 3, 2020, was another major moment of closure. I didn’t know

him personally. I almost met him in 1987 when I was shortlisted for a professorship in English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva; he happened to be at Cambridge while I was there, and that was a source of considerable disappointment to me. We corresponded a few times. While I was working on the bilingual predecessor to *The Translator's Turn* (*Kääntämisen kääntöpiirit / The Tropics of Translation*) just before my trip to Geneva, I wrote to him about meeting, and along the way mentioned my interest in translation as turning. My title was based on the Finnish verb *kääntää* “to turn, to translate” and noun *käännös* “turn, translation,” and that survived (though less obviously) in the title *The Translator's Turn*. In my first letter to Steiner (typed and snail-mailed, back then) I also mentioned the Latin verb *convertere*. Steiner wrote back with interest, mentioning that *wenden* has historically worked the same way in German. But our personal interactions never went much beyond that kind of fairly superficial engagement. So why did his passing seem so momentous to me?

I started translating in 1975. I had just finished my HuK degree—*humanististen tieteiden kandidaatti* “Candidate of the Humanistic Sciences”—or B. A. at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and accepted my first academic job as junior lecturer in the Department of English Philology at the same university. I turned 21 my first month on the job. My Finnish was already fluent, since I had spent a foreign exchange year in Finland the year I turned 17; in the 1974–1975 academic year, completing my HuK, I had minored in Comparative Literature and Finnish and Comparative Ethnography, and both of those minors had meant attending lectures in Finnish and reading a thousand-plus pages of Finnish. I suppose among us foreign lecturers in the department, my Finnish may have been the best—so when colleagues from other departments called our department secretary and asked her whether there was anyone in English who could translate an article or a conference talk, she asked me first. And I always accepted. I had no idea what I was doing, in the beginning; but one psychology professor who hired me to translate a research report she had written gave me some good advice. “You might want to try to translate the meanings of

whole sentences,” she said, “and avoid translating word for word”. The perennial advice we always seem to need to give novice translators. In any case, I got better. And I loved the work.

I thought of myself academically, however, as an Americanist; and when I returned to the US in 1981 to enter a doctoral program in an English department, I ended up defending a dissertation on American literature. It was not until, back in Finland two years later, I had revised my dissertation for publication and gotten it accepted at the Johns Hopkins University Press, that I wandered into the university library with the idea of seeing whether anyone had ever written anything about translation. Maybe I could actually *study* translation? The thought was vaguely attractive to me. I knew nothing about the theory of translation—only the practice. But maybe?

I came home with a pile of ten or twelve books, and started going through them. I didn’t make it very far into most of them; they mostly seemed quite boring. I’ve since read several of those books, and found in them far more interesting contributions to knowledge than I was able to appreciate on that initial reading; but at that point I just kept setting the books aside.

Until I picked up *After Babel* (1975). It was a big, thick, dense book, full of densely brilliant commentary on literary translations and even denser and more brilliant philosophical ruminations on translation. Every sentence was a revelation—a revelation not only about translation, but about what a rich array of things there were to be said about translation. I had gone to the library to see not just whether anything had been written about translation, but whether, once I had familiarized myself with the field, there might be anything for me to write about—anything that got my intellectual adrenaline pumping. Steiner’s book gave me an emphatic *yes* to that question. Three and a half decades later, after reading and writing about translation more than I dreamed possible back then, I’m still amazed at how many exciting things are being said about translation, and how many there are yet to be said. *After Babel* set me on that course.

Steiner also pronounced magisterially on hundreds of writers of whom and texts of which I knew little or nothing: “List Saint

Jerome, Luther, Dryden, Hölderlin, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Valery, MacKenna, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Quine—and you have very nearly the sum total of those who have said anything fundamental or new about translation.” I had no idea what any of those people had said about translation, but I was instantly ready to add George Steiner to that list. Reading *After Babel* gave me a survey course in those writers and many more. *After Babel* was my undergraduate course in translation studies. I have since taught many of those undergraduate courses, and my students have occasionally said some nice things about them, but I would be willing to bet that not one of my undergraduate courses was ever as inspiring as *After Babel* was to me.

I was of course no longer an undergraduate then. I was just shy of thirty, a fresh-baked Doctor of Philosophy whose dissertation was going into production. I was still a young man, however, and one who had not yet made the mark that he dreamed of making. To put that less heroically: my youthful arrogance had as yet no reputational confirmation. For that young man, Steiner’s overweening self-confidence as a critic and theorist was thrilling, and contagious. (If that youthful arrogance hasn’t quite died out yet as I age, don’t blame Steiner. He was an enabler, but not the cause.)

I also had reservations—many of them. Sometimes his magisterial pronouncements struck me as pompous *ex cathedra* nonsense. The notion that it’s unfair to the source author for the translator to learn to write by translating, for example: how exactly is that unfair? How does the translator’s self-improvement hurt anybody, let alone a source author who has been dead for centuries? I hadn’t yet read Cicero, then, on his own project of doing almost exactly that—using sight translation to improve not his writing but his orating—and of course, as Steiner himself says in the opening lines of his fourth chapter, Cicero is often considered the founder of Western translation theory.

Or the notion that a brilliant translation can not only eclipse but banish its source text, make it unreadable, make it disappear. What on earth? It occurred to me even then that Steiner was ignoring the variability of reader response, and so making the mistake so

many literary critics make, have always made, of assuming that a single reader's interpretation of a text *is* the text; that a text has an intrinsic structure that the intrepid literary critic simply registers and articulates; that the "meaning" or "structure" or "style" of a literary text is not an audience-effect that varies from reader to reader but an intrinsic property of the text. If Steiner preferred Paul Celan's German translations of Jules Supervielle to the French source texts, that doesn't make his preferences a fact about Supervielle, because it doesn't even mean that every reader of the French text must feel the same way. Some, perhaps most, may not be able to read German; some may never even have heard of Celan; some may read Celan and still prefer Supervielle's originals. Translation can only have a transformative impact not on a text itself (black marks on a white page) but rather on the audience-effect that we call a (source) text; and it can only have that impact on the audience-effect emerging out of the phenomenological orientations of bilingual stereoscopic readers. And even if it has that impact on some such "eligible" readers, it won't necessarily have it on all. Only uncritical acquiescence to the ideological norm that reifies audience-effects as ontologies can allow a critic to imagine one text transforming the quality of another. Steiner's pronouncements were themselves readerly, of course—they were propelled into truthiness by the sheer force of his own readerly persona—but he didn't seem to be aware of that. He presented his interpretations as transcendental truths. I'm inclined to put that down to intellectual laziness—surely a theorist of Steiner's stature should be aware of the epistemological assumptions he's bringing to a subject—but it may also be that Olympian "self-confidence" (or let's say male privilege) of his work as well.

His fifth chapter, "The Hermeneutic Motion", was huge for me. That second word in the chapter's title alone made me identify as a hermeneutical scholar of translation. The idea that you could write a hundred pages outlining a process model of translation, with copious case studies taken from exemplary translation histories, blew my mind. I didn't quite get it, early on: what was the exact phenomenological status of the four moves, Trust, Penetration, In-

corporation, and Restitution? Was the hermeneutic motion the process of translation for each individual translator, or a series of aggregate stages in a whole translation history, or simply a convenient taxonomy for dividing key aspects of all literary translation into separate categories?

The more I studied translation in the decades that followed, in fact, the more convinced I became that Steiner didn't get it either: that "The Hermeneutic Motion" was conceptually a mess. The casual misogyny of the second move, Penetration, which Steiner cheerfully likened to rape, was disturbing, and just kept getting more disturbing the more I thought about it. The fourth move, Restitution, seemed to me like sheer idealized spin. How could anything ever be restituted by or in or through a translation? Translating doesn't take anything away from a source text; how could it possibly give anything back? What could it possibly mean to balance the books? But sure, if you're going to compare translating to war and rape, if you're going to situate it in a colonial context a decade-plus before the emergence of postcolonial translation theory, it's probably good protective coloring to pretend that postcolonial restitution is not only possible but the very *raison d'être* of translation.

And this notion that for Heidegger all interpretation is a violent act is not only not true, it's saturated in a fascist ideology that adumbrates the politics of the US President whose last day in office is today: for Heidegger the only kind of interpretation that is a violent act (and therefore to be enthusiastically embraced) was the Nazi interpretation that smashes resistance (cf. pp. 311–12 of the 1967 edition of *Sein und Zeit*, and p. 359 of the 2001 edition of Macquarrie and Robinson's English translation). That's not *all* interpretation; it's only what Heidegger calls *die ontologischen Interpretation* "ontological interpretation." There's also the boring kind that doesn't exterminate *das* multimillion-headed *Man*. In the early 1970s when Steiner was writing *After Babel*, it was still possible to be a Heideggerian and ignore Heidegger's Nazism—even for cosmopolitan Jewish intellectuals like Steiner whose family had successfully moved twice in his childhood to stay out of Hitler's reach.

Not that I had any idea of any of this myself, back in 1984 when I first read *After Babel*. I felt a certain uneasiness at the idea that all interpretation is a violent act, and that therefore the act of translating, too, was steeped in rape and genocide—but I worried (silently) that my resistance to the extremism of Steiner’s Heideggerianism was just my liberal bourgeois humanism. What if he was right? What if I was in denial because I had been brainwashed by late-capitalist American consumer liberalism?

One last influence: somatic theory. I first started theorizing the somatics of translation in *The Translator’s Turn*, written in 1988–1989, with immediate prompting from William James and Kenneth Burke, and the full-scale psychological onslaught of Akhter Ahsen’s imagery movement; but I was primed to react enthusiastically to a somatics of language by George Steiner:

- Speech rhythms obviously punctuate our sensation of time-flow and may well have synchronic relations with other nervous and somatic beats.
- Wittgenstein’s dissatisfactions with the status of “pain” and other internalized sensations correlate closely with questions about pain and other somatic data raised by psychologists and physiologists.
- Perhaps “alterity” will do: to define the “other than the case,” the counter-factual propositions, images, shapes of will and evasion with which we charge our mental being and by means of which we build the changing, largely fictive milieu of our somatic and our social existence.
- The experiencing of this “difference from” is itself a personal, psychological manifold extending from an indistinct somatic basis (the phonetics, the sensory “feel,” the savour, the velocities, the pitch and stress system of the two tongues) the whole way to the most abstract, intellectualized awareness of semantic contrast.

Steiner’s theory of translation was full-bodied. It emerged out of the phenomenological tradition, the study of the lived experience of situated embodiment. That was overwhelmingly powerful for me. I first read *After Babel* four years before I started writing *The*

Translator's Turn, just as Hans Vermeer and Justa Holz-Mänttari were publishing their radical skopos theories. In 1987 I became Justa's counterpart in the Translation Studies Department at the University of Tampere, and during the two years we were associate professors there together (Finnish-German and Finnish-English, respectively) she invited Hans to Finland twice. Skopos theory was a revelation to me—but it wasn't fully embodied. It was a sociology of organizational communication, but without bodies. Hans Krings invented the first empirical process model for translation studies through the use of Think-Aloud Protocols in 1986, and our Finnish-Russian counterpart in the department was into that; but again, not embodied. TAPs tracked purely mental cognition. Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar in Tel Aviv were radicalizing the study of translation in literary and cultural systems at around that same time—but they modeled the systems fairly mechanistically, without the affect-laden pressures of values.

Only George Steiner was bringing embodied phenomenology to the study of translation. Only *After Babel*—the book that became my undergraduate course in translation theory—hinted at a somatics of translation. Steiner didn't do much with it, but the intellectual seed was sown, and *The Translator's Turn* was the result. That book was a freakish oddity in the field when it appeared; no one else was studying translation as an embodied phenomenology at the time, and it was met with considerable suspicion (“sixties touchy-feely”) and even contempt (“mystical biologism”). “Oh,” one person said to me at a conference, “you're Doug Robinson: you're the guy who says translators don't need to think; all they have to do is feel.”

Uh huh.

These days there is a whole school of TS thought studying affect under the general rubric of cognitive translation studies; it has become quite respectable. I'm especially impressed with the work of Séverine Hubscher-Davidson, in her 2007 doctoral dissertation, articles in the teens, and her 2017 Routledge book *Translation and Emotion: A Psychological Perspective*. Sometimes I like to imagine that I was there first, in 1991, in *The Translator's Turn*; but, of course, George Steiner was there a decade and a half ahead of me.

The End of an Era

But then Steiner's somatics of translation was amateur hour, based on brilliant amateur reframings of phenomenological hermeneutics. So was mine. As I say, end of an era.