'PIDGIN OR PENTECOST'?
ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Abstract

Literary critic George Steiner closed his controversial but seminal study After Babel with the words 'It would be ironic if the answer to Babel were pidgin and not Pentecost'. In this paper, Steiner's argument, leading to this conclusion, is explained. His basic thesis is that all understanding is translation. Even in one's own language, differences, boundaries, of time and space, make translation inevitable in every act of communication. According to him, 'Babel' was ambiguous, at the same time a disaster and a blessing, 'a rain of stars'. The many languages represent many ways of constructing the world. Together they claim 'that the world can be other', can be different. In a sense, every act of translation is therefore both a messianic act, bringing salvation nearer, but also an act of treason. Steiner explains translation as interpretation, understanding, hermeneutics, and argues for a fourfold hermeneutical process with ethical implications. On the basis of his argument, topics for discussion within the field of contextual hermeneutics are suggested.

1. From hermeneutics to dialogue to translation

'*It would be ironic if the answer to Babel were pidgin and not Pentecost.*' With these words, George Steiner closes his controversial but seminal and powerful *After Babel* (1992:495).

In past years, we have talked about contextuality in hermeneutics. Given the contextual nature of our knowledge and our readings, we asked questions of accountability and integrity. Last year, we discussed the possibilities of dialogue between contexts, of commonality and communication. We ended with the question what happens *when* contexts meet: Transformation? Or confrontation? Or confusion? And we decided to reflect on the question *how* these meetings take place, how they become possible: Through imagination? Through translation?

After Babel is a major study of translation. It was first published in 1975. It claimed to be the first systematic investigation of the theory and processes of translation since the eighteenth century. Steiner's basic thesis is that *all understanding takes the form of translation*. He argues this in six wide-ranging and fascinating, often challenging chapters.

2. After Babel: Pidgin or Pentecost?

2.1   To speak is to translate

The first chapter is called 'Understanding as translation' (1992:1-51). He wants to argue 'a simple point' (1992;18), a truism (1992:47), but 'one whose great importance and consequences usually go unexamined' (1992:47): 'Any thorough reading of a text out of the past of one's own language and literature is a manifold act of interpretation' (1992:18). Critics, editors, actors, readers, are all on common ground (1992:27). They interpret.

'Interpretation', says Steiner, 'as that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription' is what he is concerned with (1992:28). The French word *interpréte* concentrates all the relevant values, like acting and playing the piano. The English term *interpreter* is less strong, therefore he prefers *translator*.

'This, I believe, is the vital starting point', he claims (1992:28). '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 ... Exactly the same model - and this is what is rarely stressed - is operative within a single language. But here the barrier or distance is time ... In either case the means of penetration are a complex aggregate of knowledge, familiarity, and re-creative intuition' (1992:29).

The process of diachronic translation *inside one's own language*, however, often goes unnoticed, precisely because we perform it so constantly and unawares. We often fail to see the decisive part this kind of translation plays in the very existence of civilization. In this regard, Steiner makes interesting comments about history and cultural memory: 'By far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it is a verbal construct. History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense. Even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be 'read', i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement, before they assume real presence. What material reality has history outside language, outside our interpretive belief in essentially linguistic records (silence knows no history)? ... To remember everything is a condition of madness. We 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' (1992:30). And each reading, each translation differs, each is undertaken from a distinctive angle of vision, says Steiner.

It is in the light of this that he describes 'the recent revolts of the young' as a 'metaphysic of the instant'. In it, he argues, 'a surrealistic syntax is at work: the past tense is to be excluded from the grammar of politics and private consciousness ... To remember is to risk despair.' This tendency, this 'slamming of the door on the past', is understandable, he says, yet 'it is an innocence destructive of civilization as it is ... destructive of literate speech. Without the true

fiction of history, without the unbroken animation of a chosen past, we become flat shadows. Literature ... has no chance of life outside constant translation within its own language. Art dies when we lose or ignore the conventions by which it can be read, by which its semantic statement can be carried over into our own idiom ... In the absence of interpretation ... there could be no culture, only an inchoate silence at our backs. In short, the existence of art and literature ... depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of internal translation. It is no overstatement to say that we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time' (1992:31).

To this, however, a second element must be added. Translation also has to do with space. If culture depends on the transmission of meaning across time, it depends also on the transfer of meaning in space (1992:32-50). Steiner refers to regional modes and to dialects, often causing polarisation and mutual incomprehensibility. Sometimes branches of the same language demand translation to one another.

But there are more important examples of this. '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, profession, age, and sex' (1992:32).

Different castes, different strata of society use a different idiom. '(T)he uses of inflection, grammatical structure, and word-choice by different social classes and ethnic groups to affirm their respective identities and to affront one another' are extremely important. Languages, argues Steiner, conceal and internalize more than they convey outwardly. Social classes, racial ghettos, speak at rather than to each other. He discusses many examples ('upper-class English diction, with accent worn like a coat of arms'; the speech of lower classes, 'no less a weapon and a vengeance').

The language of ideology becomes an interesting phenomenon. It is characterised by polysemy, the capacity of the same word to mean different things. Competing ideologies rarely create new terminologies. Instead, they give 'fiercely disparate meanings' to the same words; antithetical meanings. 'The words of the adversary are appropriated and hurled against him ... Translation in the ordinary sense becomes impossible' (1992:32-35).

He pays special attention to the different language worlds that women inhabit in many societies (1992:39-47).

His point is, therefore, clear and simple. 'Any model of communication is at the same time a model of trans-lation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance. No two historical epochs, no two social classes, no two localities use words and syntax to signify exactly the same things, to send identical signals of valuation and inference. Neither do two human beings' (1992:47). A study of language is a study of translation.

2.2 Why do human beings speak thousands of tongues?

In the second chapter, 'Language and gnosis' (1992:51-114), Steiner moves to the age-old question *why* there are different languages at all, *'why does homo sapiens ... not use one common language?'* (1992:52).

'Translation exists because men (Steiner does not use inclusive langauge, DJS) speak different languages. This truism is, in fact, founded on a situation which can be regarded as enigmatic and as posing problems of extreme psychological and socio-historical difficulty. *Why* should human beings speak thousands of different, mutually incomprehensible tongues?' (1992:51).

According to Steiner, it is wrong to take this simply for granted. We live in a pluralist framework, he says, and have done so since the inception of recorded history, and have therefore, mistakenly, taken 'the ensuing farrago for granted': 'It is only when we reflect on it, when we lift the facts from the misleading context of the obvious, that the possible strangeness, the possible 'unnaturalness' of the human linguistic order strikes us' (1992:51).

This should be one of the more central questions in the study of the cerebral and social evolution of humankind, he says. Both linguistics and anthropological investigations of actual language have made a mistake in relegating this question 'into the shadow of futile, metaphysical speculation' (1992:51).

Indeed, 'no civilization but has its version of Babel, its mythology of the primal scattering of languages' (1992:59). He moves through all kinds of theories, mythical, religious, mystical, philosophical (1992:59-114) including the theory of an *Ur-Sprache*, the Kabbalistic and Hasidic viewpoints, with modern versions in Benjamin, Kafka, and Borges, then Leibniz and Hamann, and Humboldt, Herder, Sapir, and Benjamin Lee Whorf, also Cassirer and Chomsky.

Particularly interesting is Walter Benjamin's influential 1923 essay, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers'. At the messianic end of history, all separate languages will return to the source of their common life. In the interim, translation 'has a task of profound philosophic, ethical, and magical import' (1992:67).

2.3   In every act of translation a touch of treason ...

In the third chapter, 'Word against object' (1992:115-247), the focus shifts from (speculation and theory about) language itself to the workings of *real language* in *real people*. He is particularly critical of modern linguistics, claiming to be a kind of meta-science. He argues that 'such generality and abstraction go against the grain of other, perhaps equally important elements in the structure of language' (1992:120). If we except the Moscow and Prague language-circles, he says, 'it can fairly be said that many modern analytic linguists are no great friends to language'! (1992:127). The procedures of linguistics are reductionistic. He quotes Roman Jakobson with approval: 'Chomsky's epigones often know only one language - English - and they draw all their examples from it' (1992:245).

In order to make this criticism more concrete, he concentrates on the experience of 'men and women who have in fact grown up in a multilingual condition' (1992:114). He tells his own quite remarkable story to illustrate this issue, calling himself *a polyglot* (1992:120-129).

He then discusses four 'principal dualities' which characterize natural language, namely the duality between physical and mental aspects of language (1992:129-135), the duality between language as time-bound and as creator of time (1992:135-169), the duality between the private and the public nature of

language (1992:169-215), and the duality between truth and falsity (1992:215-244). The comments are often speculative, but learned, and challenging.

With regard to language and time, for example, he says that there is clearly a sense in which language occurs *in* time. As we think and talk, time passes. 'Because language is expressive action in time, there can be no unsaying, only denial or contradiction, which are themselves forward motions. Hence the wish, so literal when it refers to menace, to curses, to taboo speech, 'if only I could call back my words' ...' (1992:135-136). But this occurrence of language in time is only one aspect of the relation, argues Steiner, and the easier one for us to grasp. He then spends much time reflecting on another aspect of the relation, namely that 'time, as we posit and experience it, can be seen as a function of language, as a system of location and referral whose main co-ordinates are linguistic' (1992:136).

'Language largely composes and segments time ... It is no Whorfian phantasy to say that our uses of time are mainly generated by the grammar of the verb ... (D)ifferent cultures operate with and within different images of time. We know of constructs that are cyclical, spiralling, recursive, and, in some instances of hieratic representation, almost static. Whether language 'causes' these different architectonics, or whether a given grammar merely reflects and codifies a time-scheme elaborated 'outside language', is difficult to say. Most probably, linguistic and non-linguistic factors interact at stages of cultural evolution so rudimentary that we have no real evidence about them' (1992:137).

He then demonstrates at length how grammar constructs time. Does the past have any existence outside grammar? he asks, and discusses the nature and role of *memory* as well as *all constructions of history as a form of translation*. He appeals to Bultmann's position that there can be no presuppositionless readings of the past. 'To all past events, as to all present intake, the observer brings a specific mental set. It is a set programmed for the present ... The historian's perception of past tenses, his own personal usage of them, are generated by a linguistic set 'in' and 'of' the present. Except in mathematics and, perhaps, in formal logic - the issue is controversial - there are no non-temporal truths ... When we use past tenses, when we remember, when the historian 'makes history' (for that is what he is actually doing), we rely on what I shall call from here on, and throughout the discussion of translation, axiomatic fictions' (1992:143-144).

As far as the future is concerned, this is even more important. 'The status of the future of the verb is at the core of existence. It shapes the image we carry of the meaning of life, and of our personal place in that meaning. No single individual or even culture can produce a comprehensive statement of the notions of futurity ... Again, the proper start is wonder, a tensed delight at the bare fact, that there *are* future forms of verbs, that human beings have developed rules of grammar which allow coherent utterances about tomorrow ... '(1992:145).

How did this form of language develop? We do not know, says Steiner. 'We have no history of the future tense' (1992:148). But then he moves into a fascinating discussion of possibilities and phases, including Aristotle, the Stoics, Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, Malebranche, Leibniz, Hume, Kant, Bergson, Peirce, Eddington, Frege et al (1992:149-153). In the early history of the

Christian churches and their principal heresies, he says, issues of predestination, of foreknowledge, and of the nature of Divine omniscience played a large part. 'These issues, together with the ontological and grammatical debates they provoked, have continued to mark the course of Western logic. Thus the treatment of linguistic and conceptual time-flow in Book XI of Saint Augustine's *Confessions* has lost nothing of its intense, probing interest ...' (1992:149). His sweeping observations include the Hebrew prophets ('futures play a major role in the 'tenseless' syntax of the Hebrew Old Testament, where 'tenseless' simply refers to a grammatical system in which past, present, and future are not distinguished and demarcated as they are in non-Semitic grammars such as Greek and Latin. Timeless, but enunciated *in time* (a paradox which Augustine will explore ...), the words of God mesh closely but also 'strangely' with the understanding, with the historical self-understanding of a people itself committed to a special, eschatological temporality', 1992:153); extreme sectarian visions and their linguistic expressions; the shift from an imminent expectation of Christ's return to 'a millenary calendar, to the numerological and cryptographic search for the true date of His return'; the mystery of the transubstantiative rite, enacted in each mass, with its own tense-logic; and many other similar shifts in the experience of the future and accordingly in language and grammar.

'These sovereign antinomies and suspensions of the common grammar of tense recur in fundamentalist and chiliastic movements throughout Western history. Repeatedly, conventicles, illuminati, messianic communities have proclaimed the imminent end of time and striven to act accordingly ...(T)he doom churches now proliferating in southern California, produce a similar idiom. There is no day after tomorrow. The promise of Revelation is at hand: 'these shall be time no longer'. From a sociolinguistic point of view, it would be of extreme interest to know the extent to which such convictions actually reshape speech habits. One would, for instance, want to know whether the faithful who accepted voluntary, ritual suicide at Jonestown avoided the future sense as their apocalypse neared ... Reportedly, the Old Believers in Russia, seeking martyrdom and immediate ascent into the kingdom of God, used the future tense sparingly, if at all' (1992:159).

These religious movements have secular and scientific counterparts. 'There is an abundant literature concerning the new linearity and open-endedness of felt time brought on by Galilean and Newtonian physics ... What effect had the statement of the Second Law of Thermodynamics on sensibility and speech at large? ... Has the notion of a thermal death of the universe, of 'our' universe at least, affected the psychological tenor and linguistic conventions of uses of the future tense?' (1992:160-168).

His point is again clear. 'Future tenses are an example ... of the more general framework of non- and counter-factuality. They are a part of the capacity of language for the fictional and illustrate the absolutely central power of the human word to go beyond and against 'that which is the case'. Our languages simultaneously structure and are structured by time, by the syntax of past, present, and future. In Hell, that is to say in a grammar without futures, 'we literally hear how the verbs kill time' (Mendelstam's penetrating comment on Dante and on linguistic form echoes his own asphyxia under political terror, in the absence of tomorrow)...' (1992:168-169).

With regard to the third polarity, of language as both private and public, he starts with Wittgenstein's well-known comments on private language, but moves on to Leibniz, Chomsky, Kafka, Shakespeare, Celan, and others (1992:169-207). In the process, he deals with different attempts to 'create a new language': 'This making new can take three forms: it can be a process of dislocation, an amalgram of existing languages, or a search for a self-consistent neologism' (1992:196). He quotes from Lewis Carroll, Octavio Paz, *Finnegans Wake*, the Russian futurists and Dada and the Surrealists (1992:196-207).

He concludes: An essential part of all natural language is private (although not in Wittgenstein's sense). 'This is why there will be in every complete speech-act a more or less prominent element of translation. All communication 'interprets' between privacies' (1992:207):

'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. It is because the correspondence between words and 'things' is, in the logician's sense of the term, 'weak' that language is strong ...What Esperanto or Novial does is to translate 'from the top'. Only the more generalized, inert aspects of significance survive. The effect is that of a photographic 'still' taken by a tourist on his first visit to a country whose actual forms of life, whose 'context of situation' he does not grasp. There are conditions of 'translation' in which an Esperanto is of undisputed efficiency: but these are minimalist conditions. They abstract those imprecise and redundant energies which make possible the communication - always approximate - of what we as individuals, as participants in a particular milieu and family of remembrance are trying to say' (1992:214).

This does not, however, diminish the importance of the public elements of language, of the drive towards clarity and consensus, continues Steiner.'These also are deeply-rooted constants in the evolution of speech and their role has, if anything, become greater in the course of history. 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. If a substantial part of all utterances were not public or, more precisely, could not be treated as if they were, chaos and autism would follow' (1992:214-215).

'Again we are dealing with an indispensable duality, with a dialectical relation ... The tensions between private and public meaning are an essential feature of all discourse. the hermetic poem lies at one extreme, the S.O.S. or the road-sign at the other. Between them occur the mixed, often contradictory and in some degree indeterminate usages of normal speech. Vital acts of speech are those which seek to make a fresh and 'private' content more publicly available without weakening the uniqueness, the felt edge of individual intent' (1992:215).

And with regard to the fourth polarity between truth and falsehood, Steiner argues a similar point. Now he deals at length with 'the history of the linguistic turn' ('at least four main stages'). At stake is, of course, 'the relations between language and the world'. In this process, 'falsehood' - in Nietzsche's sense - has crucially important 'creative' ability, argues Steiner.

'Linguists and psychologists (Nietzsche excepted) have done little to explore the ubiquitous, many-branched genus of lies. We have only a few preliminary surveys of the vocabulary of falsehood in different languages and cultures. Constrained as they are by moral disapproval or psychological malaise, these inquiries have remained thin. We will see deeper only when we break free of a purely negative classification of 'un-truth', only when we recognize the compulsion to say 'the thing which is not' as being central to language and mind' (1992:232).

We need a word, he says, 'which will designate the power, the compulsion of language to posit 'otherness''' (1992:232). For this, he suggests '*alternity*': 'To define the 'other than the case', the counter-factual propositions, images, shapes of will and evasion ...'We invent for ourselves the major part of experience,' says Nietzsche ... Or, as he puts it ..., man's genius is one of lies' (1992:233).

Again, he asks about the history of this ability: 'When did man grasp the power of speech to 'alternate' on reality, to 'say otherwise'?' (1992:234). And why? At first, he conjectures, it probably had a banal survival value. Fiction was disguise. To misinform, to utter less than the truth was to gain a vital edge of space or subsistence. But soon 'the adaptive uses of 'alternity' reached deeper, ... the instrumentalities of fiction, of counter-factual assertion were bound up with the slowly evolving, hazardous definition of self' (1992:235). He refers to the large number of legends and stories in which people were forced to reveal their names to someone else, like Jacob to the Angel: '(This) is the crux of identity, the perilous gift a man makes when he gives his true name into the keeping of another. To falsify or withhold one's real name ... is to guard one's life, one's karma or essence of being, from pillage or alien procurement. To pretend to be another, to oneself or at large, is to employ the 'alternative' powers of language in the most thorough, ontologically liberating way ... Through the 'make-up' of language, man is able, in part at least, to exit from his own skin and, where the compulsion to 'otherness' becomes pathological, to splinter his own identity into unrelated or contrastive voices. The speech of schizophrenia is that of extreme 'alternity'' (1992:236).

The 'relevant framework' for 'the creative function of language non-truth or less-than-truth' is not one of morality, but of survival, argues Steiner. In fact, only a small portion of human discourse is informative in any monovalent and unqualified sense. And the scheme of unambiguous propositions that formal grammars are looking for, is an abstraction. Human speech conceals far more than it confides; it blurs more than it defines; it distances more than it connects. he agrees with Adorno: 'The only true thoughts are those which do not grasp their own meaning' (1992:240).

Now, he thinks, we may at last have an approach to the Babel problem.'All developed language has a private core ... We speak first to ourselves, then to those nearest us in kinship and locale. We turn only gradually to the outsider, and we do so with every safeguard of obliqueness, of reservation, of conventional flatness or outright misguidance ... In the process of external contact a pidgin must have arisen ... In brief: I am suggesting that the outwardly communicative, extrovert thrust of language is secondary ... Each tongue hoards the resources of

consciousness, the world-pictures of the clan. Using a simile still deeply entrenched in the language-awareness of Chinese, a language builds a wall around the 'middle kingdom' of the group's identity. It is secret towards the outsider and inventive of its own world' (1992:244).

In that sense, he concludes, 'The Babel myth is once again a case of symbolic inversion: mankind was not destroyed but on the contrary kept vital and creative by being scattered among tongues' (1992:244). And in this sense, he adds, 'There 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 ...' (1992:244).

And a poem - illustration of the untranslatable - is then neither a contingent nor a marginal phenomenon of language. A poem is maximal speech. 'A poem concentrates, it deploys with least regard to routine or conventional transparency, those energies of covertness and of invention which are the crux of human speech' (1992:244). It is with this conception that a philosophic linguistic must come to terms, and it is here that generative linguistic falters.

The thrust of all of this is obvious. He celebrates the plurality of language-worlds, the differences created by diverse languages. He finds linguistic theory, with its 'profound bias towards 'monolingualism' (that) pervades generative theories of language and their inference of universality'rudimentary, a prioristic and reductionistic. It is an attempt to exclude precisely those 'disorders' and the 'non-acceptabilities' which Steiner regards as 'among those springs of 'counter-communication' and 'alternity' which give language its primary role in our personal lives and in the evolution of the species' (1992:245).

This, claims Steiner, 'is my main point': Human beings, in their real languages, are speaking themselves free from total organic constraint. '*Language is a constant creation of alternative worlds*. There are no limits to the shaping powers of words, proclaims the poet ... Uncertainty of meaning is incipient poetry. In every fixed definition there is obsolescence or failed insight. The teeming plurality of languages enacts the fundamentally creative,'counter-factual' genius and psychic functions of language itself. It embodies a move away from unison and acceptance ... to the polyphonic, ultimately divergent fascination of manifold specificity' 1992:246).

Precisely the existence of diverse natural languages demonstrates this. '*Each different tongue offers its own denial of determinism. 'The world', it says, 'can be other.*' Ambiguity, polysemy, opaqueness, the violation of grammatical and logical sequences, reciprocal incomprehensions, the capacity to lie - these are not pathologies of language but the roots of genius. Without them the individual and the species would have withered' (1992:246).

This has major implications for translation. 'In translation the dialectic of unison and plurality is dramatically at work. In one sense, each act of translation is an endeavour to abolish multiplicity and to bring different world-pictures back into perfect congruence. In another sense, it is an attempt to reinvent the shape of meaning, to find and justify an alternate statement. The craft of the translator is deeply ambivalent' (1992:246).

Translation, for Steiner, is therefore no specialized activity at the interface between languages, but the constant, 'at once welding and divisive' nature of speech itself, the very centre of language itself (1992:246). He quotes Octavio Paz with approval: '*Our* age, our sensibilities, are immersed in the world of translation or, more precisely, in a *world* which *is itself a translation of other worlds*, of other systems' (1992:247)

2.4   Every act of translation is a messianic act, bringing redemption nearer ...

This argument brings him to his next theme, namely *the theory of translation itself*, discussed in chapter four, called 'The claims of theory' (1992:248-311). The question he asks is: 'How does this world of translation work, what have men shouted or whispered to each other across the bewildering freedom of the rubble at Babel?' (1992:247).

He divides the large body of literature on the theory, practice, and history of translation into *four periods*, though the lines of the division are in no sense absolute, he says (1992:248). 'The *first* period would extend from Cicero's famous precept not to translate *verbum pro verbum* ... and Horace's reiteration of this formula in the *Ars poetica* some twenty years later, to Hölderlin's enigmatic commentary on his own translations from Sophocles (1804). This is the long period in which seminal analyses and pronouncements stem from the enterprise of the translator. It includes the observations and polemics of Saint Jerome, Luther's magisterial *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen* of 1530 ... There are major theoretic texts in this first phase ... for example ... Pierre Daniel Huet's *De optimo genere interpretandi*, published in Paris in 1680 ... Huet's treatise is, in fact, one of the fullest, most sensible accounts ever given of the nature and problems of translation. Nevertheless, the main characteristic of this first period is that of immediate empirical focus' (1992:248).

The first epoch of primary statement and technical notation ends 'with Alexander Fraser Tytler's *Essay on the principles of translation* issued in London in 1792, and with Friedrich Schleiermacher's decisive essay *Ueber die verschiedenen Methoden des Uebersetzens* of 1813. This *second* stage is one of theory and hermeneutic inquiry. The question of the nature of translation is posed within the more general framework of theories of language and mind. The topic acquires a vocabulary, a methodological status of its own ... The hermeneutic approach - i.e. the investigation of what it means to 'understand' a piece or oral or written speech, and the attempt to diagnose this process in terms of a general model of meaning - was initiated by Schleiermacher and taken up by A.W. Schlegel and Humboldt. It gives the subject of translation a frankly philosophical aspect. The interchange between theory and practical need continued, of course. We owe to it many of the most telling reports on the activity of the translator and on relations between languages. These include texts by Goethe, Schopenhauer, Matthew Arnold, Paul Valéry, Ezra Pound, I..A. Richards, Benedetto Croce, Walter Benjamin, and Ortyga y Gasset. This age of philosophic-poetic theory and definition - there is now a historiography of translation - extends to Valery Larbaud's inspired but unsystematic *Sous l'invocation de Saint Jérome* of 1946' (1992:249).

This brings us to a *third* phase, in Steiner's words 'the modern current': 'The first papers on machine translation circulate at the close of the 1940s. Russian and Czech scholars and critics, heirs to the Formalist movement, apply linguistic theory and statistics to translation. Attempts are made, notably in Quine's *Word and Object* (1960), to map the relations between formal logic and models of linguistic transfer. Structural linguistics and information theory are introduced into the discussion of interlingual exchange. Professional translators constitute international bodies and journals concerned mainly or frequently with matters of translation proliferate. It is a period of intense, often collaborative exploration of which Andrej Fedorov's *Introduction to the Theory of Translation* (Moscow, 1953) is representative. The new directions were set out in two influential symposia: *On Translation*, edited by Reuben A. Brower and published at Harvard in 1959, and *The Craft and Context of Translation: A Critical Symposium* which William Arrowsmith and Roger Shattuck edited for the University of Texas Press in 1961' (1992: 249-250). In many ways we are still in this third phase, is his opinion. 'The approaches illustrated in these two books - logical, contrastive, literary, semantic, comparative - are still being developed' (1192:250).

Since the early 1960s, however, says Steiner, 'certain differences in emphasis have occurred' (1992: 250). Several influences contributed to this *fourth* phase. 'The 'discovery' of Walter Benjamin's paper 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', originally published in 1923, together with the influence of Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, has caused a reversion to hermeneutic, almost metaphysical inquiries into translation and interpretation (1992:250). Much of the confidence in mechanical translation, which marked the fifties and sixties, has ebbed (1992:250).

Several implications become clear. In particular, the study of the theory and practice of translation has become a point of contact between established and newly evolving disciplines, argues Steiner. 'It provides a synapse for work in psychology, anthropology, sociology, and such intermediary fields as ethno- and socio-linguistics' (1992:250).

The adage, familiar to Novalis and Humboldt, that '*all communication is translation*', has taken on a more technical, philosophically grounded force (1992:250): 'Classical philology and comparative literature, lexical statistics and ethnography, the sociology of class-speech, formal rhetoric, poetics, and the study of grammar are combined in an attempt to clarify the act of translation and the process of 'life between languages'' (1992:250-251).

However, claims Steiner, despite this rich history, and despite the calibre of those who have written about the art and theory of translation, the number of original, significant ideas in the subject remains very meagre ... Over some two thousand years of argument and precept, the beliefs and disagreements voiced about the nature of translation have been almost the same' (1992:251).

The perennial question whether translation is, in fact, possible at all, is rooted in ancient religious and psychological doubts on whether there ought to be any passage from one tongue to another, he says (1992:251). He refers to a number of religious texts and figures, including Paul, to argue 'so far as speech is divine and numinous, so far as it encloses revelation, active transmission either into the

vulgate or across the barrier of languages is dubious or frankly evil', and therefore one often finds religious 'inhibitions about decipherment, about the devaluation which must occur in all interpretive transcription ...' Quite often, translation would be blasphemy (1992:251-252).

Since the fifteenth century, continues Steiner, this 'postulate of untranslatability' has a purely secular basis. It is now 'founded on the conviction, formal and pragmatic, that there can be no true symmetry, no adequate mirroring, between two different semantic systems' (1992:252). But he adds: 'This view shares with the religious, mystical tradition a sense of wastage' (1992:252). Having given many examples, he concludes: 'The point is always the same: ash is no translation of fire' (1992:253). Traditionally, poetry is used to illustrate this, but 'attacks on the translation of poetry are simply the barbed edge of the general assertion that no language can be translated without fundamental loss' (1992:255).

This issue, says Steiner, takes on a special intensity where philosophy is concerned. Philosophy is 'a model of Babylonian confusion': 'Many of its abstract concepts defy illustration. Some defy definition. Others are definable but not conceivable ... Problems of untranslatability strike at the heart of the whole philosophic enterprise' (1992:255).

Yet, 'between the most hermetic poem or metaphysics and the most banal prose, the question of translatability is only one of degree. 'The contextuality and the temporality of every language utterance cause the problem. 'Language ... is intuitive; each speech-act is, in any rigorous, exhaustive sense, unprecedented; it is instantaneously creative in that it has acted on, expanded, altered the potential of thought and sensibility. Strictly considered, no statement is completely repeatable (time has passed). To translate is to compound unrepeatability at second and third hand. *L'intraducibilità is the life of speech*' (1992:256).

However, there is also a case to be made *for* the possibility of translation. Once again, this case has religious, mystical antecedents. It would be sacrilege, Steiner argues, to give to the act of God at Babel 'an irreparable finality'. Instead, 'the scattering of tongues at Babel has in it, in a condition of urgent moral and practical potentiality, the return to linguistic unity, the movement towards and beyond Pentecost' (1992:256). This makes translation 'a teleological imperative' (1992:256).

The strength and the consequences of this approach can be seen in the long tradition of Kabbalism. He quotes Benjamin for support as well as Franz Rosenzweig, who said, when announcing his projected version of the Old Testament: *'Every translation is a messianic act, which brings redemption nearer'* (1992:257).

Similar convictions led to vast practical consequences in Western Christianity, and particularly in Protestantism. 'Much of the Western theory and practice of translation stems immediately from the need to disseminate the Gospels, to speak holy writ in other tongues ... (Acts 2:4). The *translatio* of Christ's message and ministry into the vulgate is a constant theme in Patristic literature and the life of the early Church. From Saint Jerome to Luther it becomes a commonplace, ceaselessly proclaimed and acted upon. No man must be kept from salvation by mere barriers of language. Each voyage of discovery brought with it the troubling

presence of peoples whom distance and language had left ignorant of Christ's promise to man ... To translate Scripture into these literally darkened tongues is urgent charity. Each impulse towards reformation from inside the Church brings with it a call for more authentic, more readily intelligible versions of the holy word. There is a very real sense in which reformation can be defined as a summons to a fuller, more concrete translation of Christ's teachings both into daily speech and daily life' (1992:257-258).

Again, the view that translation is essential to the spiritual progress of human beings found secular counterparts. 'Though the quarrel over whether or not pagan texts should be read and translated at all is nearly as old as Christianity itself and flared up at frequent intervals, it was of course the Western Church which proved to be the great disseminator of the classics. The history of transfer and dissemination goes back at least to late twelfth- and thirteenth-century Toledo. In that meeting-point of Islamic, Christian, and Judaic intellect and sensibility, a number of scholar-translators, of erudite exegetists whose commentaries were a part of the translation into Latin of Hebrew and Arab texts (the latter often deriving from Greek originals), created a veritable interlingual centre. Throughout this seminal enterprise, Jews, either openly of the faith or converts, played a key role. It is in Toledo and southern France during brief moments of religious tolerance that the distinctive, perhaps decisive involvement of Jewish consciousness and polyglot inclinations with the conveyance and dissemination of ideas throughout Europe may be said to have begun' (1992:258-259).

Steiner then tells the story of the 'development of knowledge and argument via translation' (1992:259), of the role of translation in affirming the dignity of human beings and of a common humanity (1992:259) and of the history of translation coinciding with and informing the history of Western thought and feeling' (1992:259).

In this respect, '*imagination*' plays a crucial role. The 'translations' of history and of ancient texts into the present are often creative, original, inventive, filled with fantasy, critical. 'No 'original' composition was more creative of new intellectual, social possibilities than were Erasmus's version of the New Testament (1516) or the Luther Bible (1522-34) ... Antiquity was 'invented' more than it was discovered ... and this invention in turn led to new sight-lines on the present and the future. Translation provided the energies of Renaissance and Baroque Europe with an indispensable if largely fictive reinsurance ... The Platonic, the Ovidian, the Senecan presence in European intellectual and emotional life of the late fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries was at once a guarantor that argument, fantasy, metaphor can be sustained at full pitch without muddle, that the human intellect can return from far places with the evidence of reasoned form, and an incitement to build against, to go beyond the classical achievement. Galilean science ... depends on the same dialectical relation to its Aristotelian background: it works from and against the classical canon' (1992:259-260).

Translation was, '*in a full sense of the term, the matière première of the imagination*' (1992:261). The Renaissance and Reformation translators 'principally made up the chronology, the landscape of reference in which Western

literacy developed and whose obvious authority has only very recently been undermined' (1992:260).

Translation also provided the integrative socio-political imagination in a time of radical and dramatic disorder. 'It established a logic of relation between past and present, and between different tongues and traditions which were splitting apart under stress of nationalism and religious conflict' (1992:261).

He refers to Milton as example: 'With its English, Latin, and Italian verse, with its at-homeness in Hebrew and Greek, Milton's book of poems of 1645 illustrates, supremely, the created contemporaneity of ancient and modern and the unified diversity - coherent as are the facets of a crystal - of the European community as they derive from two hundred years of translation' (1992:261).

In times and situations like this, translations are often celebrated and translators praised. He quotes Goethe ('Say what one will of the inadequacy of translation, it remains one of the most important and valuable concerns in the whole of world affairs') and Pushkin ('speaking out of the isolation of the Russian condition, Pushkin defined the translator as the courier of the human spirit') (1992:261-262).

However, admits Steiner, affirming the moral and cultural excellence of translation is easy, but it is more than difficult to refute the charge of theoretic and practical impossibility of translation. He then spends a long section on this charge. He admits, not *everything* can be translated. ('Theology and gnosis posit an upper limit. There are mysteries ... In such cases it is best to preserve the incomprehensible'). Not everything can be translated *now*. ('Contexts can be lost, bodies of reference which in the past made it possible to interpret a piece of writing which now eludes us'). And there are texts which we cannot *yet* translate. ('They may become translatable in the future ... As Dilthey was probably the first to emphasize, every act of understanding is itself involved in history, in a relativity of perspective. This is the reason for the commonplace observation that each age translates anew, that interpretation ... is always reinterpretation, both of the original and of the intervening body of commentary'). In this respect, he strongly agrees with Walter Benjamin's famous notions on 'future translatability' (1992:262).

Having admitted all of this, however, Steiner affirms that translation is possible and in fact inevitable. To use language is to translate. To communicate is to translate. 'We *do* speak of the world and to one another. We *do* translate intra- and interlingually and have done so since the beginning of human history' (1992:264). He comments that 'this defence of translation has the immense advantage of abundant, vulgar fact. How could we be about our business if the thing was not inherently feasible, ask Saint Jerome and Luther with the impatience of craftsmen irritated by the buzz of theory. Translation *is* 'impossible' concedes Ortega y Gasset ... But so is all absolute concordance between thought and speech. Somehow the 'impossible' is overcome at every moment in human affairs ... Deny translation ... and you must be consistent and deny all speech. Translation is, and always will be, the mode of thought and understanding' (1992:264).

So, to dismiss the validity of translation because it is not always possible and never perfect, concludes Steiner, is absurd. What *does* need clarification, however, is the *degree of fidelity* to be pursued (1992:264). This now raises important questions of 'criteria' in the hermeneutic enterprise, including questions of fidelity (1992:259-260).

In the history, one regularly finds a 'triadic system', a 'threefold framework' of possible answers to this set of questions (he discusses Dryden, Goethe and Roman Jakobson as examples, 1992:264-265): 'It can be argued that all theories of translation - formal, pragmatic, chronological - are only variants of a single, inescapable question. In what ways can or ought fidelity to be achieved? What is the optimal correlation between the A text in the source-language and the B text in the receptor-language? The issue has been debated for over two thousand years'(1992:275).

And, whatever the answer has been, the execution always falls short. At best, translations can, through 'cumulative self-correction' come ever nearer to whatever ideals, but there can never be complete success. 'From the perception of unending inadequacy stems a particular sadness. It haunts the history and theory of translation. *'Wer uebersetzt'* proclaimed the German poet and pietist Matthias Claudius, *'der untersetzt'* ... There is a special *miseria* of translation, *a melancholy after Babel ...'* (1992:283).

Steiner then devotes a long and fascinating section to the strange fact that translation (except for the study of the transmission and interpretation of the Biblical canon) has been so remarkably neglected and ignored in the history and the theory of literature! By way of a large number of quotations and illustrations, questions and criticisms, he argues his claim: '(T)hough translation is probably the single most telling instrument in the battle for knowledge and woken consciousness in the underdeveloped world, the translator himself is often a ghostly presence. He makes his unnoticed entrance on the reverse of the title-page. Who picks out his name or looks with informed gratitude at his labour?' (1992:284).

Drawing this chapter to a close, he develops his main idea at some length, namely that 'translation' is a metaphor, a way of looking, at all forms of communication, speech, and understanding. He now explicitly draws on the notions of difference and otherness, quoting Levinas explicitly: '(T)he development of modern phenomenology has accentuated the areas of overlap between translation theory and the general investigation of sense and meaning. The conceptual claims, the idiom of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas force on anyone concerned with the nature of translation a fuller awareness of, a more responsible discomfort at, notions of identity and otherness, of intentionality and signification. When Levinas writes that significance constantly transcends designation, he comes close to equating all speech-acts with translation in the way indicated at the outset of this study' (1992:293).

For himself, 'every understanding is actively interpretive. Even the most literal statement ... has a hermeneutic dimension. It needs decoding. It means more or less or something other than it says' (1992:295). Although he readily admits that many of his claims cannot be proved, he says 'I strongly feel that the hypothesis

of 'alternity' and meta- or non-information is the one which describes most coherently the actual facts of linguistic diversity' (1992:300).

As far as Babel is concerned, this means for him: 'It is conceivable that we have misread the Babel myth. The tower did not mark the end of a blessed monism, of a universal-language situation. The bewildering prodigality of tongues had long existed, and had materially complicated the enterprise of men. In trying to build the tower, the nations stumbled on the great secret: that true understanding is possible only when there is silence. They built silently, and there lay the danger to God' (1992:301).

The conclusion of these chapters on language and the theory of translation is that the claims of linguists since the 1950s that the study of language has become a science, are rejected. I am tempted to go further, he says, 'very likely, it never will be a science. 'Language is, at vital points of usage and understanding, idiolectic' (1992:309). Speaking is a partial description of the world. Communication is translation, always more or less complete. Translation is not a science, but an exact art. In the next chapter, he attempts to illustrate this.

2.5 Trust - conquest - embodiment - restitution

For our purposes, chapter five is particularly interesting. There he discusses hermeneutics, under the theme of 'The hermeneutic motion'' (1992: 312-435).

The hermeneutic motion, the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning, taking place in language and communication, is *fourfold*, according to Steiner. This hermeneutic view of translation allows one to overcome what he calls 'the sterile triadic model' which has dominated the history and theory of translation. 'The perennial distinction between literalism, paraphrase, and free imitation, turns out to be wholly contingent. It has no precision or philosophical basis. It overlooks the fact that a fourfold hermeneia, Aristotle's term for discourse which signifies because it interprets, is conceptually and practically inherent in even the rudiments of translation' (1992:319).

The first step is *initiative trust*, 'an investment of belief, underwritten by previous experience, but epistemologically exposed and psychologically hazardous, in the meaningfulness, in the 'seriousness' of the facing or, strictly speaking, adverse text' (1992:312). We venture a leap, says Steiner. 'All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust' (1992:312). The trust is never final, since it is often betrayed, for example trivially, by nonsense, by the discovery that 'there is nothing there' to elicit and translate.

The second move of the translator is incursive and extractive. *'After trust comes aggression'* (1992:313). It is like an invasion. Saint Jerome spoke of 'meaning brought home as captive by the translator'. 'The translator invades, extracts, and brings home' (1992:314). For this reason, says Steiner, there is often a sadness after the success of translation (and understanding), the Augustinian *tristitia* which follows on the cognate acts of erotic and intellectual possession. For a moment, the seductive (or hostile) 'otherness' has been removed, lost.

The third move is *incorporative*, in the strong sense of the word, according to Steiner's scheme. But this is a dialectical moment; 'the dialectic of embodiment entails the possibility that we may be consumed' (1992:315). He gives several examples. It also happen to individual translators. they may be enriched and energised by what they understand and translate, but they can also 'be mastered and made lame by what we have imported. There are translators in whom the vein of personal, original creation goes dry ... Writers have ceased from translation, sometimes too late, because the inhaled voice of the foreign text had come to choke their own' (1992:315-31). This can also happen to societies ...

Explaining this third move, he discusses issues of 'alternity', 'difference' (Derrida), 'untranslatabilities', resistance, and 'mis-taking' (1992:351-415).

This is another way, adds Steiner, of saying that the hermeneutic motion is 'dangerously incomplete' if it lacks the fourth stage, namely *compensation*, or *restitution*, 'the piston-stroke, as it were, which completes the cycle' (1992:316).

Balance must be restored, is the image he uses. 'The a-prioristic movement of trust puts us off balance. We 'lean towards' the confronting text ... We encircle and invade cognitively. We come home laden, thus again off-balance, having caused disequilibrium throughout the system by taking away from 'the other' and by adding, though possibly with ambiguous consequence, to our own. The system is now off-tilt. The hermeneutic act must compensate. If it is to be authentic, it must mediate into exchange and restored parity' (1992:316).

He regards this 'enactment of reciprocity' in order to restore balance as 'the crux of the métier and morals of translation' (1992:316).

Translation at the same time causes loss in the original (hence the fear of translation, 'the taboos on revelatory export which hedge sacred texts, ritual nominations, and formulas in many cultures') and enhances the original. The enhancement is obvious in many ways (1992:316-318).

Here Steiner re-introduces the key notion of fidelity. 'Fidelity is not literalism or any technical device ... The translator, the exegetist, the reader is faithful to his text, makes his response responsible, only when he endeavours to restore the balances of forces, of integral presence, which his appropriative comprehension has disrupted. Fidelity is ethical, but also, in the full sense, economic. By virtue of tact, and tact intensified is moral vision, the translator-interpreter creates a condition of significant exchange. The arrows of meaning, of cultural, psychological benefaction, move both ways. There is, ideally, exchange without loss' (1992:318-319).

This 'dialectic of trust', this 'reciprocal enhancement' is both moral and linguistic, argues Steiner (1992:416). He discusses 'numerous concrete, historical realizations' of this 'offertory turn of the translator towards the original text which he had penetrated, appropriated and left behind' (1992:416-435). For example, translation recompenses in that it provided the original with a persistence and geographical-cultural range which it would otherwise lack (Greek and Latin classics); translation into a world-language makes a general force of texts written in a local tongue (Kierkegaard, Ibsen, Strindberg, Kazantzakis); translation can

illuminate, clarify the original; translation can reveal the stature of a body of work undervalued or ignored in its native guise (Faulkner).

Primarily, however, the reciprocity is technical, it has to do with fidelity, with 'adequacy' (1992:416). Translation fails where it does not compensate, where there is no restoration of radical equity. This can happen in diverse ways, through fragmentation and distortion, through diminution ('the common imbalance') *and* through magnification ('the subtler form of treason'; when the translator excels the author, the original is subtly injured and the reader is robbed of a just view).

2.6   English of some sort ... So much correct, so little right

Finally, Steiner broadens his reflections to culture in general, under the rubric of 'Topologies of culture' (1992:436-495). His overall argument has been that translation proper is merely a special, heightened case of the process of communication and reception in any act of human speech. The fundamental epistemological and linguistic problems implicit in interlingual translation, believes Steiner, are already implicit in all intralingual discourse. A theory of translation studies the operations of language itself. And a hermeneutic, an understanding of understanding, includes both. (1992:436). It is therefore no accident, is his opinion, 'that the methodical investigation of semantic processes begins with Kant's call for a rational hermeneutic and with Schleiermacher's study of the linguistic structures and translatability of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek scriptures. To study the status of meaning is to study the substance and limits of translation' (1992:436).

In the last chapter, he argues that all these considerations cannot be limited to the spoken or the written word. 'Translation is ... a constant of organic survival. The life of the individual and of the species depends on the rapid and/or accurate reading and interpretation of a web of vital information. There is a vocabulary, a grammar, possibly a semantic of colours, sounds, odours, textures, and gestures as multiple as that of language, and there are may be dilemmas of decipherment and translation as resistant as any we have met ...' (1992:437).

He, therefore, applies the notion of 'alternity' and his model of translation to the larger questions of inherited meaning and culture.

Once again, it is a wide-ranging discussion, touching on music, painting and art, literature, recent anthropology and interest in myth, ritual and symbolism, and many other spheres of culture and meaning. 'Western art is, more often than not, about preceding art; literature about literature. The word 'about' points to the crucial ontological dependence, to the fact that a previous work or body of work is, in some degree, the raison d'être of the work in hand. We have seen that this degree can vary from immediate reduplication to tangential allusion and change almost beyond recognition. But the dependence is there, and its structure is that of translation' (1992:485).

In conclusion, he therefore raises two important issues, flowing from these observations on culture as translation. The first is an issue that Steiner often addresses in other work as well, namely the controversial concept of '*cultural canons*' (see Steiner 1971, 1973, 1988, 1989a). According to some, there is reason for grave concern. 'Do those whose antennae are most alert, who, in the

words of the Russian poetess Tsvetaeva, have 'perfect pitch for the future' really anticipate the end of the linguistic-cultural continuum? And if so, what evidence is there to support their terror, their flight to the musée imaginaire? ... The flowering of a sub- 'and semi-literacy in mass education, in the mass media, very obviously challenges the concept of cultural canons. The discipline of referential recognition, of citation, of a shared symbolic and syntactic code which marked traditional literacy are, increasingly, the prerogative or burden of an élite. This was always more or less the case, but the élite is no longer in an economic or political position to enforce its ideals on the community at large (even if it had the psychological impulse to do so). There is no doubt that patterns of articulate speech, reading habits, fundamental legacies of grammaticality, are under pressure. We read little that is ancient or demanding; we know less by heart' (1992:491).

He is, however, not as alarmed as some others. 'Although the inroads of populism and technocracy on cultural coherence have been drastic, the scale, the depth of penetration of the phenomenon are very difficult to assess. The outward gains of barbarism which threaten to trivialize our schools, which demean the level of discourse in our politics, which cheapen the human word, are so strident as to make deeper currents almost impalpable. It may be that cultural traditions are more firmly anchored in our syntax than we realize, and hat we shall continue to translate from the past of our individual and social being whether we would or not' (1992:491).

The second issue is almost the opposite. The threat of dispersal, of a crisis, could stem from another and paradoxical direction, says Steiner, and discusses the international role of English. "At countless points on the earth's surface, English will be the most available language - English of some sort.' I.A. Richards's prediction, made in 1943, has proved accurate' (1992:492). Like no other language before it, English has expanded into a world-language, outstripping its potential competitors. A large part of the impulse behind this spread, observes Steiner, is obviously political and economic. All statistics, however, do not make the main point, he says: 'In ways too intricate, too diverse for socio-linguistics to formulate precisely, English and American-English seem to embody for men and women throughout the world - and particularly for the young - the 'feel' of hope, of material advance, of scientific and empirical procedures. The entire world-image of mass consumption, of international exchange, of the popular arts, of generational conflict, of technocracy, is permeated by American-English and English citations and speech habits' (1992:493).

In the light of his own views on language, it is obvious why Steiner is worried by this movement. He first points to 'opposing trends', to language communities, 'threatened at their most vulnerable point of self-definition' who attempt to resist 'the Anglo-saxon tide' (1992:493).

English itself, however, also suffers loss in this process. 'The externals of English are being acquired by speakers wholly alien to the historical fabric, to the inventory of felt moral, cultural existence embedded in the language. The landscapes of experience, the fields of idiomatic, symbolic, communal reference which give to the language its specific gravity, are distorted in transfer or lost

altogether. As it spreads across earth, 'international English' is like a thin wash, marvellously fluid, but without adequate base. One needs only converse with Japanese colleagues and students, whose technical proficiency in English humbles one, to realize how profound are the effects of dislocation. So much that is being said is correct, so little right. Only time and native ground can provide a language with the interdependence of formal and semantic components which 'translates' culture into active life. It is the absence from them of any natural semantics of remembrance which disqualifies artificial languages from any but trivial ad hoc usage' (1992:494).

However, the loss for the native language-cultures is even more. They are being eroded all over the globe. 'Intentionally or not, American English and English, by virtue of their global diffusion, are a principal agent in the destruction of natural linguistic diversity. *This destruction is, perhaps, the least reparable of the ecological ravages which distinguish our age* (1992:494).

Again, the loss occurs both ways. 'More subtly, the modulation of English into an 'Esperanto' of world-commerce, technology, and tourism, is having debilitating effects on English proper ... Ubiquity is causing a negative feedback ... If dissemination weakened the genius of the language, the price would be a tragic one ... It would be ironic if the answer to Babel were pidgin and not Pentecost' (1992:495).

3. Babel: disaster or a rain of stars?

In the 1992 edition, Steiner includes a long preface, responding to responses and explaining his original intention once again. It is an attempt 'to map a new field, a new space for argument' (1992:ix). There had been 'no full-scale endeavour to relate, to bring into interactive focus, the diverse areas of rhetoric, of literary history and criticism, of linguistics, and of linguistic philosophy. There had been no ordered or detailed attempt to locate translation at the heart of human communication' (1992:ix).

He also reiterates his basic claims. Translation is implicit in every act of communication. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate. The essential means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in all acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language. Translation between languages is just a particular application of this.

The teeming difficulties encountered inside the same language by those who seek to communicate across spaces of historical time, of social class, of different cultural and professional sensibility, demonstrate this. He complains that his 'instigations to enquiry' concerning the 'dilemmas of inadequate translation posed by the radical differences between the speech-habits, voiced and unvoiced, of men and women' have scarcely been followed up. Instead, 'certain recent currents in feminism and 'women-studies' have brutalized or made trivial the complex, delicate fabric of evidence' (1992:xii).

The Babel-question is why human beings speak thousands of mutually incomprehensible tongues, some of which are set only a few miles apart (1992:xiii).

His own answer follows a Darwinian paradigm of evolutionary benefit. This clearly seems wrong, since 'even at a glance, the disasters, be they economic, political, or social, which have attended on the thousandfold 'babbling after Babel' are palpable' (1992:xiii). At closer consideration, however, he argues that the survival of humanity had been made possible through the constructive powers of languages, this 'miraculous capacity of grammars to generate counter-factuals, 'if'-propositions and, above all, future tenses. 'We endure, we endure creatively due to our imperative ability to say 'No' to reality. To build fictions of alterity, of dreamt or willed or awaited 'otherness' for our consciousness to inhabit' (1992:xiv).

Important for him, in this regard, is therefore the insight that 'each human language maps the world differently ... Each tongue - and there are no 'small' or lesser languages - construes a set of possible worlds and geographies of remembrance. It is the past tenses, in their bewildering variousness, which constitute history' (1992:xiv).

He finds 'an immensely positive, 'Darwinian' logic in the otherwise baffling and negative excess of languages spoken on the globe (1992:xiv). 'The affair at Babel was both a disaster and - this being the etymology of the word 'disaster' - a rain of stars upon man' (1992:xviii).

Therefore, Steiner says, *'When a language dies, a possible world dies with it'* (1992:xiv).

This makes the 'After Babel'-issue a moral one. He points to 'the accelerating disappearance of languages across our earth, the detergent sovereignty of so-called major languages whose dynamic efficacy springs from the planetary spread of mass-marketing, technocracy, and the media' (1992:xiv).

In acts of translation, the moral issue becomes clearer. The concept of 'restitution', the fourth step in the fourfold hermeneutical process, 'raises ethical questions of extreme complexity ... If I was to rewrite the book now, it is this question of the morality of appropriation via translation ... which I would want to hammer out at greater length. The dilemma seems to me of central importance precisely in an age in which deconstructive criticism and self-advertising scholarship dismiss texts as 'pre-texts' for their own scavenging' (1992:xvi-xvii).

4. Translation after Babel? Comments, questions and issues

This Workshop takes place in a time of transition and radical transformation in our *society* at large, in our institutions of learning and our whole system of *education*, knowledge production and transmission, and in our places of *theological study*. Several of the issues that Steiner deals with are relevant for us as well. In other sessions we are talking about 'imagination', 'memory', 'feminist discourse', and 'fidelity'. Using slogans, I would like to remind us of *five clusters of questions*:

In the first place, these comments raise issues related to *postmodernism*. He does not use the expression, but the issues are clearly present (see e.g. Harvey 1990). Postmodernity is often described as a life after or in Babel (Hoesterey 1991). It is a celebration of plurality, of particularity, of difference, of world constructed by languages. Of particular interest is the importance of the challenges

of dialogue with 'the other' as *the* characteristic of postmodernity (see e.g. Tracy 1990). We have not had an opportunity to focus on the contribution of Levinas during these workshops. Notions like 'particularity', 'difference', 'power', 'identity', 'boundaries', all offer challenges for reflection and discussion.

Secondly, Steiner raises questions concerning *multi-culturalism*. Sanneh (1990; 1993) has reminded us of the importance of (Biblical) translation in the meeting of cultures in Africa (Combrink's paper will also address that). If, as Steiner argues, every language represents an alternative way of constructing the world, what are the implications for us in South Africa, and our language policies, and our education system, and our university culture? What does many cultures, one nation really mean (see Niehaus & Villa-Vicencio)? Is it indeed possible to be a polyglot? And will being a South African mean to be a polyglot? This raises questions of identity, and social memory. What does a politics of recognition entail (Taylor 1992)? Was Benjamin right when he saw translation as a moral task? Is translation in South Africa an act of love, of charity? Umberto Eco has recently published his fascinating survey of the search for a common language in history in a series on the unification of Europe (Eco 1994). And he says that he would have loved to use Steiner's title ...

Thirdly, *After Babel* challenges us to rethink what has been called *'the battle of the books'* (Atlas 1990), 'cultural wars' (Hunter 1991 and 1994; Gates 1992; Graff 1992), or the notion of 'cultural canons' (H Bloom 1994), the educational struggle 'to be one of us' (Warehime 1993; also A Bloom 1987). Education is not politically innocent. Research and teaching form part of a process of translation, of interpretation, of communcation. It is contested terrain. What are the possible implications of Steiner's theories for us in South Africa, in our universities and in our schools? How do we approach the language issues? And what will be the results over the coming years? How do present developments impact on art and culture, on the imagination and the memory of the children of this land?

Fourthly. Are there implications for our *doing and teaching of theology*? Is it perhaps possible to see the entire theological enterprise as a process of translation? What do we make of 'differences', of 'common language', of the presence-of-the-other in our theological enterprises? Are we indeed 'bound to differ' in our theological discourses (Kort 1992)? Can we only speak our diverse, confessional languages? Is our theological diversity a blessing, a rain of stars, or a disaster? Is a kind of ecumenical theology possible, and necessary? How are we faithful to the texts and the traditions in our imaginative re-readings of them through history? What kind of 'fidelity' is expected of us? How 'creative' can and should theology be (see the exciting study by Thiel 1991; and Smit & Wessels 1995). Do we strive for theological pidgin or theological Pentecost?

Lastly. Do we need *a common moral language* in South Africa? Can we reconstruct and develop South Africa, after the apartheid-of-Babel, on the basis of our diverse and often conflicting moral languages? Or must we work towards something common, like common values? Or would that be a form of ethical pidgin, a loss of the riches of a moral Pentecost? (see Cloete & Smit 1994; De Villiers & Smit 1994 and 1996; Smit 1991; 1994a; 1994b; 1994c; 1995a; 1995b; 1995c).

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