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HERMENEUTICS OF TRANSLATION – THE FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT OF DIALOGUE. AROUND THE CONCEPT OF GEORGE STEINER¹

*Translators are men
groping towards each other
in a common mist*

George Steiner, After Babel

DIALOGUE, COMMENTARY AND READING WITH NO LIMIT

A statement “Commentary is without end” could easily be found in Ecclesiastes. Like dialogue, commentary was established long ago, imperceptibly and without our participation, and its potential exceeds the time and capabilities of an individual. Thus, dialogue is always a matter of at least two separate sides and as such it is an idea which, throughout history, invariably continues to seek and find its creative reflection in various forms of continuity of Jewish tradition: covenants, a cycle of holidays, a model of teaching, and rabbinical commentary.

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Commenting is a demanding art of the erudite of establishing a simultaneous and multilateral dialogue of people that transcends the regime of place and time. The subject of the unique logic of commentary is addressed by George Steiner:

In Judaism, unending commentary and commentary upon commentary are elemental. Talmudic exegesis exfoliates into uninterrupted study of and commentary on the Talmud. [...] Hermeneutic unendingness and survival in exile are, I believe, kindred. The text of the Torah, of the biblical canon, and the concentric spheres of texts about these texts, replace the destroyed Temple².

Tradition in Judaism does not contain a conclusion, although it is possible that it announces one. It is a constant exchange of opinions and statements open to those who are yet to join. As a rule, the Torah, the Tanah or the Talmud cannot be read in any other way than with and through other recognized texts. One can say that they themselves constitute successive stages of overlapping comments, an incarnation of the dialogic principle, since as Alan Unterman reminds us: "it is not the text as such which is holy but the text as interpreted by the Jewish tradition of rabbinic exegesis"³. The study is a spatially and temporally extended polyphonic conversation.

It is therefore impossible to approach the text in an unmediated way. Reading the riddle of a word, verse, parsha, or story builds a link between distant events and the present day, and at the same time guides it through the many responses that members of Jewish communities have received during their lives. The answers they have given, both those recorded by scholars and those provided daily in the ordinary practice of meetings, are not absolute; they do not attempt to be the last, but rather the penultimate comments in a whole series. Those who offer the comments remember that the Messianic era is still a question of an opaque future, so that in the meantime other commentators will come and reveal other facets and possibilities of the

² G. Steiner, "A Secondary City", [w:] G. Steiner, *Real Presences. Is there Anything in What We Say?*, London 2010, p. 45.

³ A. Unterman, *Jews, Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, Boston, London and Henley 1981, p. 44.

text, emphasizing different or contradictory meanings which will be characteristic of their time and circumstances. Synthesis is the great hope of the messianic era when, as tradition has it and as Emmanuel Lévinas reminds us, “the prophet Elijah [...] will resolve all antinomies”⁴.

Hence the true risk is not an absence of ultimate answers but rather ruptures in the tradition of reading which seeks answers, since “In dispersion, the text is homeland. [...] This reading without end represents the foremost guarantee of Jewish identity”⁵, observes Steiner. Hence the merger of commentary and interpretation, as long as the latter means the definitive establishment of meaning; its closure before the time is ripe would be tantamount to the erasure of the fundamental tension between them, which points to the position taken by Rabbi Sacha Pecaric: “the concept of interpretation in this [Jewish – R. W.] tradition simply does not exist”⁶.

Maintaining continuity despite differences in time, space, conditions or language, meticulous storage and recording of glosses in their original form of inquiries, questions and answers makes us pay special attention to yet another dimension of the pulsating dialogue and commentary, a dimension distinguished by the ritualisation of the mode of universal reading of the Book. As Pecaric observes:

⁴ E. Lévinas, “Judaisme and Revolution”, [in:] E. Lévinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1990, p. 118. See also: E. Lévinas, “The Translation of the Scripture”, [in:] E. Lévinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, Bloomington & Indianapolis 1994.

⁵ G. Steiner, “A Secondary City”, op. cit., p. 46. See also: H. Bloom, “Free and Broken Tablets: the Cultural Prospects of American Jewry”, [in:] H. Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism*, Oxford 1982. Steiner also speaks about the crisis caused by a discontinuity in the context of Western culture. As he proves, the real problem for a reader who wants to understand a text may be precisely the loss of continuity of tradition (see G. Steiner, “The Broken Contract”, [in:] G. Steiner, *Real Presences*, op. cit.; G. Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, London 2010, chapter v).

⁶ S. Pecaric, “Wgląd w Pieśń nad Pieśniami. Istota języka religijnego”, [in:] *Hagada na Pesach i Pieśń nad Pieśniami*, ed. S. Pecaric, Kraków 2002, p. 233. By marking the differences between the scholastic tradition and Jewish hermeneutics, Steiner draws attention to the paradigmatic meaning of the “appetite for a summa”, a culmination which, according to him, although in a changed form, has survived in Western tradition until the present day (see G. Steiner, “A Secondary City”, op. cit., p. 47–50). Steiner stresses the link between the summa with the tendency to eradicate heresy. In the context of literary criticism, the tension between rightful science and heresy would be supplanted by that between interpretation and overinterpretation (see U. Eco, “Interpretation and History and Reply”, [in:] U. Eco with R. Rorty, J. Culler, C. Brooke-Rose, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, ed. S. Collini, Cambridge 1992).

In the Jewish world, in the world of Torah, there is a certain obligation to translate, because there is an obligation to strive for understanding. Fulfillment of the commandment of the *shna mikra weechad targum* requires two readings of the Hebrew parsha prescribed for a given week and one reading of the *targum*, i.e. translation. But not every translation. It would not be a meeting of this mitzvah to read a translation that reflects only the grammatical-semantic meanings of the Hebrew words used in the Torah. [...] No translation of a text is necessarily a reflection of the original, but a first step in its understanding⁷.

The issue of Jewish commentary goes far beyond the issue of religion, revealing to us the importance of understanding, interpreting and dialogue as the practice of translation.

UNDERSTANDING AS TRANSLATION⁸

The above assumptions were addressed by George Steiner in his extensive text from the 1970s, *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*, where he discusses the hermeneutics of translation on the basis of examples of primarily Western literature. In the text he confirms the fundamental correspondence between dialogue, translation and understanding as it is developed and fostered in the Jewish tradition. In the preface to the book we can read:

⁷ S. Pecaric, "Wstęp. Mowa na pustyni", [in:] *Tora. Księga czwarta Bemidbar*, ed. and transl. S. Pecaric, Kraków 2005, p. v-vi. The text at hand is *Targum Onkelos*, the translation of the Torah into Aramaic, which grew up in the oral tradition in Palestine in the 2nd c. AD and was written down in Babylon ca. 500 AD. The author of the text was a proselyte, a scion of Roman aristocracy. "Importantly, to this day it has retained its normative character, while the Septuaginta, which was created in the third and second centuries B.C., has not gained this status and is actually forgotten by Judaism. What is the difference between them? Well, it is simply that the Septuaginta can be called a translation aiming at the literality, while the targum by Onkelos is certainly a translation, according to tradition inspired and confirmed by Rabbi Akiba and other Tanaites, whose relation to the Hebrew original consists in explaining and making understandable", (Ibidem, p. v). See also entries: 'Bible, Reading with translations', 'Targum Onkelos' in: *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Life and Thought*, ed. C. Pearl, Jerusalem 1996.

⁸ The chapter of George Steiner's *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford 1992) I rely on the most when reconstructing Steiner's concepts is titled: "Understanding as Translation".

translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication, in the emission and reception of each and every mode of meaning, be it in the widest semiotic sense or in more specifically verbal exchanges. To understand is to decipher. To hear significance is to translate. Thus the essential structural and executive means and problems of the act of translation are fully present in acts of speech, of writing, of pictorial encoding inside any given language. Translation between different languages is a particular application of a configuration and model fundamental to human speech even where it is monoglot⁹.

Ultimately, in *After Babel* Steiner focuses on a claim which would be worth quoting again in a succinct form: “Any model of communication is at the same time a model of translation, of a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance”¹⁰.

Steiner makes the act of understanding dependent on the capacity to translate. In this regard, he equates interpreting to translating - choosing the right word or phrase to convey the expression of the original is a decision connected with understanding the given expression in all its complexity and the horizon of its context that the translator is able to grasp at a given moment in time. A repetition, or a simple rewriting is impossible. Each translation defines an index of similarities and differences whose reduction and reunification is the work of the translator. A work whose fundamental meaning comes down to an attempt to abolish distance and regain closeness, insight. Literature is only a special case here. According to Steiner, translation is in particular a daily adaptation mechanism, learned and culturally conditioned, whose efficiency usually escapes our attention.

[...] 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. Time, distance, disparities in outlook or assumed reference, make this act more or less difficult. Where the difficulty is great enough, the process passes from reflex to conscious technique. Intimacy, on the other hand, be it of hatred or of love, can be defined as confident, quasi-immediate translation¹¹.

⁹ Ibidem, p. xii.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 47.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 48.

The ability to understand the Other would be a derivative of translation competence and experience, including a wide range of gestures and phenomena accompanying the encounter, and sensitivity to the context. He points out that in such a perspective there is no opposition between intercultural and intracultural¹² and inter-subjective dialogue, but that they are based on a shared foundation and therefore cognitive intercultural competences are potentially ingrained in all individuals, provided they are capable of any acts of understanding, and can be developed within education. Thus each hermeneutic act is in fact a lesson in the transfer of meaning, in making choices and decisions, in intercultural translation. As Steiner observes: “*inside or between languages, human communication equals translation*”¹³.

The basic competences needed to participate in communication and dialogue are not based solely on knowledge, although they cannot be separated from it. Acquiring knowledge about a different culture or language does not in itself enable us to understand them; without the ability to make translations we cannot exceed the disproportion between the worlds: mine and the Other's. The quality of knowledge is a derivative of the translator's sensitivity and imagination, and experiences gained in relation to one culture or language relate to and retain their value in relation to all others. Of course, the subjects of the relationship do not have to represent mentally distant cultures, but such a case ultimately reveals the complexity of communication.

For Steiner, this incompatibility of worlds is the result of permanent changes and transformations, of a continuous, non-synchronized movement, both within language, which for him represents the embodiment of the idea expressed in the well-known maxim by Heraclitus and within the world of everyday life of every communication subject. These changes deplete the reservoir of what is shared (or rather what is proper not only for me but also for Others, not necessarily

¹² Steiner highlights the importance of the social differentiation of the communication flow due to the existence of irreducible biological and mental differences between individuals and the practice of group identities. He considers in this context the operation of separate languages, e.g. of women and children (see *Ibidem*, p. 35–47). Mikhail M. Bakhtin's concept of language and dialogue shows clear affinities to later Steiner's (see M. M. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, [in:] M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination. Four Essays*, Austin 1981, p. 259–422, in particular p. 275–300).

¹³ G. Steiner, *After Babel*, op. cit., p. 49 – original underline.

for everyone), at the same time widening the distance between the parties of a possible dialogue, the distance present because of the underlying separation of subjects, mutual separation, and the constant disposition of the individual's consciousness to concentrate on himself and his own experiences. Steiner's brief comment seems to confirm - which is not insignificant here, especially when we consider the premises of the functioning of individuals in the culture of individualism - that we are always in danger of this disposition becoming a general permanent tendency.

In old age the impulse towards translation wanes and the pointers of reference turn inward. The old listen less or principally to themselves. Their dictionary is, increasingly, one of private remembrance¹⁴.

Incompatibility is not just a way of drawing attention to the disproportionate existential situation of individuals in the social world, but also to the ontological status of languages. As Steiner points out, we have too little convincing evidence to recognize the premise that allows us to consider language as a system, as something with definable boundaries that could facilitate the constitution of a convenient cognitive perspective and to accept the claim of the symmetry of the internal architectures of each of them. Hence Steiner's emphasises dynamics and argues: "we possess civilization because we have learnt to translate out of time"¹⁵.

Translation seems to prioritize and expose the interest of the "here and now", the present moment and those present within it, over the permanence of what is inherited. Perhaps in this way it creates the conditions for the possibility of inheritance.

Accepting Steiner's emphasis on dynamics, we must also take into account the fact that our general condition is determined by notorious belatedness, the fact that we never keep up, and the whole work is reduced to shortening the distance, which is the work reiterated by

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 48.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 31. As Steiner observes, "The process of diachronic translation inside one's own native tongue is so constant, we perform it so unawares, that we rarely pause either to note its formal intricacy or the decisive part it plays in the very existence of civilization" (Ibidem, p. 29).

every generation. This work never ends; constantly undertaken from scratch, it should satisfy us with but temporary success. What should be considered a success, then?

While Steiner does not preclude an epiphany of complete understanding, he writes:

The complete penetrative grasp of a text, the complete discovery and recreative apprehension of its life-forms (*prise de conscience*), is an act whose realization can be precisely felt but is nearly impossible to paraphrase or systematize¹⁶,

Steiner, then, is far from admitting that here we should see the core of the translation practice. Understanding a text is but the very first move of the practice; the second one would be an apt paraphrase, i.e. a retranslation¹⁷. While, then, it is possible for the individual to experience an epiphany as to their awareness, providing a testimony to it in words of another translation is a tall order. One of the obstacles is specifically indicated by Steiner:

There is an acute understanding, essential to any treatment of communication within and between languages, of the ways in which a text may conceal more than it conveys¹⁸.

Our translation clumsiness reveals itself when we are faced with an excess that is only covered but not eliminated by the ontological presence of a verse, phrase or text.

[...] any genuine act of translation is, in one regard at least, a transparent absurdity, an endeavour to go backwards up the escalator of time and to re-enact voluntarily what was a contingent motion of spirit¹⁹.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 26.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, too, devotes in his works, where the questions of translation are constantly present as one of the principal subjects that span his thought, a lot of room to the incompatibility of speech and writing, accusing at the same time Western classics of ignoring it (see J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore and London 1997).

¹⁸ G. Steiner, *After Babel*, op. cit., p. 64.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 75.

Hence we must accept that, as Steiner observes, “Translation is both possible and impossible [...]”²⁰. In another place, showing his awareness of the centuries-old tradition of the questions addressed by him, Steiner writes: “Six walls of light surround Holy Scripture. Six walls: the order to translate and the prohibition to translate”²¹.

THE ORDER OF SPEECH, THE ORDER OF ACTION. PRACTICE AS COMMENTARY

From George Steiner’s perspective, practising translation is not so much meant to faithfully render the content but to shorten the distance of time and space between individuals. However, this is not so much time and space in general but the time of the Other and the space of the Other, even if we ourselves are them; this is the time and space that not only accompanies our uniqueness and particularity yet intensifies with their continuation. The individual is not so much at risk of self-dissolution or being dissolved in the Other, but of alienation and loneliness with respect to his own transformations and those of the transforming immediate environment. While translation can be seen as approximation, abandoning the effort of “trans-lation”, of transcending boundaries, is tantamount to increasing distance.

In his reflection on the hermeneutics of translation, Steiner also gives us the opportunity to look at the action as a kind of commentary, in which understanding comes to the fore. This is because here too translation occurs between two orders of the functioning of meaning - the orders of the gesture of speech and the gesture of action. Similarly, every attempt to reflect on the experience of everyday life or an artistic act requires translation between different orders - understanding what is happening is not so much a reproduction as a translating transformation and a commentary.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 66.

²¹ G. Steiner, “Aus Worten, nicht Wörtern”, *Dekada Literacka* 1997, No. 8–9, p. 21. Steiner’s text is dedicated to the translation of the Bible into German by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig and confirms the claim of a continuous dialectical correspondence between writing and speech in the Jewish tradition.

As Steiner writes, referring in this spirit to the sphere of artistic activity:

Each [selection – R. W.] embodies a specific commentary on the text, each realizes a particular mode of animation. [...] ‘Interpretation’ as that which gives language life beyond the moment and place of immediate utterance or transcription, is what I am concerned with. The French word *interprète* concentrates all the relevant values. An actor is *interprète* of Racine; a pianist gives *une interprétation* of a Beethoven sonata. Through engagement of his own identity, a critic becomes *un interprète* – a lifegiving performer of Montaigne or Mallarmé. As it does not include the world of the actor, and includes that of the musician only by analogy, the English term *interpreter* is less strong. But it is congruent with French when reaching out in another crucial direction. *Interprète/interpreter* are commonly used to mean *translator*. This, I believe, is the vital starting point. When we read or hear any language-statement from the past, be it Leviticus or last year’s bestseller, we translate. Reader, actor, editor are translators of language out of time²².

Steiner thus tries to encourage us to partially shift our attention from the goal of achieving in the act of translation an appropriate effect in the form of sense, towards action and its logic. This action is the act itself, accompanying as it were other activities – listening, speaking, writing, playing a role in the theatre, editing, performing a part for the piano. The author of *After Babel* fundamentally reverses this order – listening, writing, speaking, etc. are possible thanks to translation. They are based on it and the literary work of a translator is only a special case in which an aspect specific to the other activities mentioned above is stressed²³.

Steiner is mainly interested in works of art, but for the purposes of the philosophy of dialogue it is worth showing a broader context of the hermeneutics of translation. For example, when we think up a theory, we make acts of translation within it, drawing on various sources and authors, but in order to be able to use it in action, we need an additional

²² G. Steiner, *After Babel*, op. cit., p. 28 – original underline.

²³ The author of *After Babel* clearly navigates Jewish metaphysics, yet his direct references owe a lot to “late” Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger.

act of this type, in accordance with the assumption that it is impossible to repeat, and translation is not a reflection of a given state in a different order of meaning, but requires a transformation of this state so that it can be fitted into a given order. It follows that a theoretician is unable to bring his concept to such a stage of notation or conceptualization that it does not require further transformation in translation into practice. In this sense, thinking, speech, writing, acting are different orders of practice, different forms of human expression, and as such they require translation. Interpretation-commentary always assumes subjective participation in the form of creative invention. Demanding that “theoreticians”, i.e. practitioners of the translation of texts and thoughts, apply their work is a mis-understanding, an attempt to shift the burden of translation - transformation to others, accompanied by the hope for participation in imitation, but also an escape from responsibility for the inherent risk of transgression, the trans-lation risk.

If Steiner proposes a general theory of understanding as translation, then every action where we recognise the participation of understanding is closely linked to translation. Demanding repetition, we ask the impossible: we demand permanence. The author of *After Babel* recommends not so much an antidote for its absence but personal perseverance on the road to dialogue - practicing understanding through translation.

It is not easy to interest us in the matters of the world, of the Others, of what does not become familiar without effort. If we accept the assumptions of the hermeneutics of translation, the “learning revolution” means an increase in the importance of translation competences, which belong to general education - they involve learning to learn. By learning to translate, whether through the effort of understanding texts, conducting conversations, or through the implementation of artistic and technological projects, we broaden and consolidate our ability to use different languages, increase our fluency in moving between different orders, as well as the ability to understand and experience the world. Thus, we open up to acquiring new competences, which, apart from their uniqueness, share one thing - they are based on translation skills. Existentially, the lack of translation competence makes an individual helpless.

Practicing translation also prepares for dialogue between the parties. Exercises on texts in the absence of their authors protects against aggression and accusations but does not offer hope for an answer. A conscious translation makes us aware of an encounter with what is irreducibly different, what cannot be absorbed, but this is because familiarity is not based on absorption. Practicing translation and honing a sensitivity to uniqueness teaches the skill of transcending oneself towards meeting, towards synchrony, but does not prevent a possible refusal of the other party which, due to its otherness, remains independent in this matter. The encounter imperative makes dialogue impossible. Being oriented towards closeness is not without a risk. Ultimately, however, the hope for a non-violent relationship means openness to translation, readiness to transformation which, contrary to the risk associated with openness, may finally be reciprocated. Practicing translation helps us to stay ready, even if we do not know the time or place of the encounter.

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Abstract:

George Steiner is one of the leading contemporary comparatists and philosophers of literature. One of the most important themes of his book from the 1970s, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, focus on the claim about the identity of understanding and translation, which in effect links dialogue to translation competence. In the article, referring to the thought and tradition of Judaism and Steiner's original approach to understanding, I analyse and discuss the premises of his basic claim in relation to the phenomenon of dialogue, I study the consequences and draw conclusions from Steiner's concept for the theory and practice of education.

Keywords:

translation, understanding, dialogue, hermeneutics, George Steiner, philosophy of education, theory of education, education