

国外翻译研究丛书之十一

AFTER BABEL

Aspects of Language and Translation

通天塔之后

——语言与翻译面面观

GEORGE STEINER



外教社

上海外语教育出版社

SHANGHAI FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION PRESS

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(代序)

上海外语教育出版社自成立以来一直是我国外语教育最优秀的后勤部和侦调部。因为它不但为我国各个层次(尤其本科与研究生层次)的外语教育提供了多种高水平的教材、教参和工具书,而且还出版了多学科、多语种和多系列的中文版和外文版的学术著作,比如“现代语言学丛书”、“牛津应用语言学丛书”、“美国文学史论译丛”、“外国文学史丛书”、“剑桥文学指南丛书”、“当代英语语言学丛书”以及列入国家及教育部规划的人文社科重点项目的外国语言文学、文化等方面的图书等。为了适应我国现代化建设和教育改革的需要,还出版了一批国际金融、对外贸易、涉外保险、国际经济法、国际新闻和管理科学等方面的教材与专著。这些著作在外语的学科建设与学术研究以及复合型人才培养等方面都在发挥着强有力的侦察、调研和指导作用。这是外语界有口皆碑的。

随着中外文化交流的纵深发展以及我国现代化建设对人才的需求,对比语言学和翻译学近些年来在我国有了较快的发展,最突出的证据就是①外语类硕士博士点上研究对比与翻译方向的学生在逐年迅速增多,而且我们的高校已经有了翻译学院和翻译系(当然还太少)。②外语专业的学生考中文、法律等其他人文社科专业的硕士、博士以及反方向的走向已经起步。这种跨学科的人才已成为人才资源竞争的最主要对象,因此发展趋势定会看好。上海外语教育出版社为适应这种高层次人才培养和新学科建设的需要,不但积极出版国内关于对比研究和翻译研究的专著和论文集,最近又推出了原版“国外翻译研

究丛书”，这套丛书时间跨度从古代到现代，所选书目皆为译学发展史上有里程碑作用的名家名著，堪称译学经典。他们计划分批出版，以满足读者的需求。

这套丛书的出版首先可以解决国内翻译教学原版参考书多年匮乏的困难，真可以说是我国翻译教学与理论研究的及时雨。我想学习和关心这个学科的师生和其他人士定会对这套书的引进为之欢呼，为之祝贺。

这套丛书的价值还在于能大大促进我国翻译学科建设的发展。译学学科的发展依赖于研究者在三个方面的深入研究和结合。一是对本国译学的继承性研究；二是对外国译学的借鉴性研究；三是对翻译实践和翻译教学中新问题的探索性研究。只有这三者研究深入并结合好了，才可能从经验与技巧逐步升华为具有科学性的译学理论。这三个方面的研究，改革开放以来，在我国已取得了很显著的成就，这是有目共睹的。翻译学在我国已于 20 世纪 80 年代末有了独立学科的初级形态，90 年代又有了新的发展，对学科的独立性以及理论体系的结构与功能有了更多的探讨。依照学科建设的规律和研究现状，我们尚需在上述三个方面加大研究力度，而这套丛书就是借鉴性研究的主要资源。从这个角度讲，这套丛书的引进也是我国文化基本建设的重要工程之一。

在新的世纪，文化（包括各类科学技术）会多方面快速深入人类的日常生活，各国之间的交流会空前深广，因此翻译的功能会逐步扩大，实用性翻译人才的需求量定会空前增加。这就要求我们除了做好高层次研究型人才的培养以外，还应十分重视实用性人才的培养和应用译学的研究。我想出版社一定会关注和引导译学建设的理论研究与应用的发展趋势。

杨自俭

青岛海洋大学六三居室

2001 年 3 月 28 日

出版前言

如果要编撰一部西方语言学和翻译理论研究通史的话,乔治·斯坦纳的名字恐怕是要重重写上一笔的。其他方面姑且不论,就这一部一版再版的力著——《通天塔之后》——已足以确定作者在语言及翻译研究领域不可动摇的先驱地位了。如是评价应该说并无任何粉饰或言过其实之处,凡领略过斯坦纳精言妙语并深得要义的读者,理应作同样的观感。

顾名思义,《通天塔之后》并非是一部纯粹的翻译理论专著,事实上,书中至少有一半内容是关于语言和文化的思考。然而通读全书,则不难发现,作者就自然语言在诗学、文学批评、文化史等诸多方面所作的考究,最终都将服务于对于翻译行为的阐释。在语言研究部分,他首先引入了历时(diachronic)和共时(synchronic)概念,指出语言永远处在一个动态的变化之中,而在语言的历时和共时现象中,解释或翻译活动始终如一地贯穿其中,即一切交际或交流都是通过解释或翻译来实现的。斯坦纳对语言的研究可谓是全方位的:从柏拉图到亚里士多德,从洪堡到索绪尔再到乔姆斯基。事实上,他是对整个语言研究的历史进行了全面的梳理。

对于人类翻译活动的历史,作者也同样作了系统的追溯,在追溯过程中,我们还会看到大量关于历代文学名著翻译的实例,分析自然具有精辟和独到之处。在翻译理论部分,最为精辟的是对语言和翻译本质的论述。这里作者引入了阐释学理论(hermeneutics),提出了基于阐释学分析的四个翻译步骤:信

赖(trust)、侵入(aggression)、吸收(import)和补偿(compensation)。所谓“信赖”,就是译者相信原文是有意义的,而在理解和表达这种意义时,译者的主观因素会不可避免地“侵入”到原文中去,“侵入”的目的便是“吸收”,但“吸收”过程中又难免丧失译语的本色,这就使得第四步“补偿”十分必要了。事实上,译语本色的丧失会表现在上述所有阶段。因此,“补偿”也必须贯穿于整个翻译过程的始终,其原因是,只有通过“补偿”,才能恢复原有的平衡,才能进入翻译的理想境界。

就派别而论,斯坦纳认为翻译是一种艺术,而并非科学。他认为翻译研究目前还不是一门科学,而且将来也难以发展成为一门独立的科学,其主要理据是,作为翻译研究支撑点的语言研究目前尚未而且将来也未必能够成为一门独立的科学。

斯坦纳是一位并不多见的博学之士,他能熟练使用英、法、德三种语言并精通各门现代科学,常常能以旁人难以企及的渠道对同一个问题进行敏锐的多视角、多学科的交叉透析。此外他的文学功力以及对文学的阐释能力也非一般人所能比。凡此等等,要解读他并非易事,然而一旦领略了他的风格,彻悟了他的思想,一切的“艰深”都将化解在博大精深之中。

《通天塔之后》初版于1975年,“它的问世为18世纪以来关于翻译理论与过程的系统性研究开了先河”,“是一部里程碑式的著作”。这的确不是溢美之辞。经过再三修订,当该书于1998年第三次付梓时,它那百科全书似的语言与翻译研究建构体系又一次折服了同行,于是好评如潮,也是自然的事。

正是基于上述事实和思考,我们才自信地将《通天塔之后》推荐给国内读者,深信它的推出能不负众望,将有力地促使我国语言与翻译研究事业的进一步繁荣和发展。在此,我们要特别指出的是:由于意识形态领域的差异,作者在书中个别地方流露出一些不妥当的观点,希望读者在阅读这些段落时注意批判、鉴别。

FOR ZARA

'eyn 'a^hereth

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

THOUGH this book has, to a great extent, had to define and map its own field, it is none the less dependent on a large body of related work. One's bibliography and footnotes are, in this respect, the most genuine act of thanks. The origin of the present study lies in the *Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation* which I edited in 1966 (and which was later reissued under the title *Poem Into Poem*). Tony Richardson was a close collaborator in that project. His early, tragic death has left a constant void. There are deficiencies in the present book which he would have been the first to note. During the course of work, I have benefited from exchanges with translators and with the increasing number of poets and scholars concerned with translation. Let me mention only Robert Fitzgerald, Roger Shattuck, Donald Carne Ross, William Arrowsmith, Nathaniel Tarn, John Frederick Nims, Christopher Middleton, and Octavio Paz. Some of the theoretical and practical matter presented in this book first came up in the course of seminars at Harvard, Yale, and the University of Zürich. In each case, the debt which I owe to my students is considerable. It will also be obvious, at various points, how much I profited from the personal interest of Claude Lévi-Strauss and I. A. Richards. Thomas Sebeok, whose knowledge of the whole range of current language-studies may well be unrivalled, has been a good listener. Noam Chomsky has been generous in expressing his disagreements in private communication (an exchange of views is included in my earlier book, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution*). Mr. Robin Anderson, of Churchill College, read the first three chapters in draft and offered critical advice on technical issues. During early stages of research, I received invaluable support from the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Like so many other writers and scholars, I found in my Director, Prof. Gordon Ray, a vital ally. My indebtedness to my assistant, Mrs E. Southern, would be difficult to put summarily.

In a direct sense, this volume owes its existence and scope to the initiative of Jon Stallworthy and his colleagues at the Oxford University Press. Theirs have been the indispensable patience and criticism. Mr Bernard Dod and Mr Nicolas Barker have proved the most exacting and helpful of copy-editors. Jon Stallworthy is himself both a poet and a translator. The advantage has been mine.

It is, under this rubric, customary to thank one's family and immediate circle of friends for their forbearance or enthusiasm during a long spell of often obsessive work. But there is cant in doing so, for what choice had they? The dedication of this book, on the other hand, says only a fraction of what it means.

G. S.

Cambridge, October 1973

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

BOTH the philosophy and practice of translation are in constant motion and debate. In the five years since the second edition of this book there have been marked developments.

The new status of eastern Europe has occasioned a veritable tide of translations both into English and into the relevant languages. Czech, Polish, Hungarian, and Romanian literature are beginning to reach the Anglo-American world-audience. In turn, Western texts, long forbidden, are being imported. Criteria of interlingual transfer, the history of translation, and the implication of the translator's 'exact art' in every aspect of comparative literary and cultural studies, are the object of study and teaching. By salutary paradox, moreover, Anglo-American masters, notably among the poets, are themselves turning more and more to translation. It is as if the planetary dominion of their privileged world-speech entails growing responsibilities towards the genius of more constricted national traditions and sensibilities. Whether by direct or interposed means, British and American writers are translating across a whole gamut of tongues, stretching from Russian and Japanese to Portuguese.

The darkening eclipse of the Greek and Latin languages and classics in our schools has heightened the need for translation, particularly of a non-academic order. The current charted by *After Babel*, already in 1975, has become a bright torrent: our finest poets, a Seamus Heaney, a Ted Hughes, a Derek Walcott are translating from or 'imitating' metamorphically such texts as Homer, Ovid, Catullus, Seneca. Tony Harrison and Christopher Logue are virtuosos of often penetrative re-creation. A later classic such as Dante is drawing more and more translators from among the most vivid of our poetic voices. Still out of reach lies the exigent genius of Racine.

Research into diverse modes of machine- or machine-assisted translation continues. Some intriguing results have been achieved at the 'Berlitz' level—that is to say in the restricted vocabulary and

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syntax of the tourist or business-traveller. Mechanical glossaries and rudimentary textual transfers are proving of rough and ready assistance in the translation of certain technical and legal communications. But the notion, abroad in the 1950s and 1960s, of the machine-translation of natural language, let alone literature, is receding. The incommensurability of semantic context, set out in this book, most likely makes such expectations illusory.

There is also a reassuring modesty in more recent claims made for a 'theory of translation'. *After Babel* tries to show that there cannot, in any strict or responsible sense, be any such 'theory'. The cerebral proceedings which would have to underlie and explain it are simply inaccessible. At best, we have narratives of translational *praxis*. It is to these that the most useful journals in the field are now turning. Increasingly, actual practitioners are allowing a look into the workshop, into the successive drafts and revisions which generate the (incomplete) product. Therein lies the fascination of the interlingual and what substantive perceptions we can record of its fertile complexity. I would feel rewarded if *After Babel* has been an instigation.

Both in 1975 and 1992, I sought to conjecture as to the polyglot future in the face of the global detergence by an Anglo-American *esperanto*, itself splitting into more local though cognate forms. Chinese remains a formidable but inwardly focused rival. Culturally and demographically, Spanish is on the march. 'Smaller' and isolated languages, notably in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout Amazonia, are perishing, as is the ecology inwoven in their unique image of life. Thus one is tempted to suppose that the triumphalism of science, of technocracy, of international finance and the mass-market media will assure the long-term hegemony of Anglo-American (computer languages reflect and enforce this prepotence). Reality, however, is always subtler and more ironic than our suppositions. It may well be that the Tower of Babel will continue to cast its creative shadow.

G.S.

Cambridge, August 1997

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

THIS book was written under somewhat difficult circumstances. I was at the time increasingly marginalized and indeed isolated within the academic community. This is not, necessarily, a handicap. Tenure in the academy today, the approval of one's professional peers, the assistance and laurels in their giving, are not infrequently symptoms of opportunism and mediocre conventionality. A degree of exclusion, of compelled apartness, may be one of the conditions of valid work. Scientific research and advance are in substantial measure and logic collaborative. In the humanities, in the disciplines of intuitive discourse, committees, colloquia, in the conference circuit are the bane. Nothing is more ludicrous than the roll-call of academic colleagues and sponsors set out in grateful footnotes at the bottom of trivia. In poetics, in philosophy, in hermeneutics, work worth doing will more often than not be produced against the grain and in marginality.

But there are dangers. *After Babel* attempts to map a new field, a new space for argument. There has been (though it remains rare) penetrative insight into the act of translation, into the phenomenological and philosophic aspect of this act from the time of Seneca to that of Walter Benjamin and W. v. O. Quine. Practising translators (though again these are rare) have left descriptive records of their craft. The sheer volume of literary, historical, philosophic translation on which Western civilization has depended for its lineage and dissemination constitutes material for systematic analysis and reflection. But there had been, before *After Babel*, 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 or to explore the ways in which the constraints on translatability and the potentialities of transfer between languages engage, at the most immediate and charged level, the

philosophic enquiry into consciousness and into the meaning of meaning.

Inevitably, such an attempt at innovative synthesis will be vulnerable. To an extent almost defiant of common sense, approved academic studies have fragmented into minute specialisation. The parish grows smaller with every teaching appointment or research grant. The sanctioned vision is microscopic. More and more is being published in learned journals, by academic presses, about less and less. The note is one of Byzantine minutiae, of commentaries on commentaries on commentaries towering like inverted pyramids on single points often ephemeral. The specialist holds the 'generalist' or 'polymath' in vengeful disdain. And his authority and technical grasp over a given inch of ground may, indeed, exhibit a confidence, an immaculate humility, denied to the comparatist, to one who (awkwardly or with a peremptory bound) crosses stiles between fields.

To attempt a comprehensive poetics of translation was foolhardy enough. To do so in isolation from the support which might, under other circumstances, have been provided by sympathetic readers of different chapters in the university, was to incur manifest risks. The first edition of *After Babel* contained errors and imprecisions. It contained inexactitudes of phrasing, particularly in reference to what were then called transformational generative grammars. It lacked clarity in regard to the vital topic of temporality in Semitic and in Indo-European syntax. There can be no apology for these defects, only thanks to those who pointed them out (notably Professor Edward Ullendorff in a review-essay of magisterial severity). But the acerbities of the response to *After Babel* in academe did not stem from reproof over details. It betrayed a profound, worried dismay at the very concept of a larger perspective, of an alliance between philosophic concerns, poetic sensibility, and linguistics in the more formal and technical sense. To Roman Jakobson, to William Empson in his *Structure of Complex Words*, to Kenneth Burke—a neglected master in language-studies—such an alliance was the obvious imperative for hermeneutics. By the mid-1970s, the barriers ran high between specializations inebriate with a largely spurious claim to 'scien-

tific' status. Among stamp collectors letter-writers are not always welcome.

More characteristic of the mandarin trade than direct attack was the 'passage under silence' (as French has it) of the book. Wholly representative of this strategy is the footnote in a recent (highly intelligent) monograph on philosophy and translation: *After Babel* is designated as self-evidently the most important text in the entire domain of translation studies and of the philosophic issues they entail. After which no further mention or citation occurs. Since it first appeared, *After Babel* has been drawn upon and pilfered, often without acknowledgement. A considerable secondary literature has grown up around many of the themes first stated in the book. Fascinatingly and nearly implausibly, this study of translation, with its insistence on difficulty, on the singularity of different speech-worlds and its prodigality of examples from poetry, has itself been translated into languages ranging from Romanian to Chinese. My awed thanks go to those who have undertaken this vexing task. Each translation has thrown searching light on the fundamental propositions in the original. Nevertheless, and although it has been continuously in print, *After Babel* remains to academic linguists, to those who theorize about or claim to teach translation, an irritant and the anarchic act of an outsider.

I value, therefore, the invitation from the Oxford University Press to publish this second edition. Errata have, so far as possible, been corrected. Loose or confused moments in the argument have been amended. Material published after 1974-5 has been included in new or expanded footnotes. The bibliography, which even those hostile to the enterprise found invaluable, and appropriated, has been updated. Much of this work has been made possible by the privileged context of a European university chair (the oldest in the field of comparative literature). I now can enlist the resources, the critical exchanges with colleagues, the help in research which were not available to me when I wrote the book. My particular gratitude goes to my colleague and assistant Aminadav Dyckman, a philologist, linguist, and student of Slavic poetics of passionate exactitude.

Yet even in this corrected guise, *After Babel* will, I suspect,

continue to be something of a scandal or *monstrum* which the guilds of linguistic scholarship and linguistic and analytic philosophy will prefer to neglect. Central tenets in this work remain almost deliberately misunderstood or threatening. Let me set them out summarily—and without repentance.

After Babel postulates that 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 monoglot. This general postulate has been widely accepted. I try to illustrate it by considering 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. More especially, I invite consideration of the dilemmas of inadequate translation posed by the radical differences between the speech-habits, voiced and unvoiced, of men and of women. Here it is not socio-linguistics or psycholinguistics, nor even anthropology, which illuminate most. It is the intuitive probes of poets, dramatists, and novelists when they articulate the conventions of masked or failed understanding which have obtained between men and women, between women and men, in the lineaments of dialogue we call love or hatred. The subject is pivotal to our perceptions of self and society. Certain recent currents in feminism and 'women-studies' have brutalized or made trivial the complex, delicate fabric of evidence. So far as I can judge, the instigations to enquiry in this book have scarcely been followed up.

But although we 'translate' at every moment when speaking and receiving signals in our own tongue, it is evident that translation in the larger and more habitual sense arises when two languages meet. That there should be two different languages, that there

should have been, at a rough estimate, more than twenty thousand spoken on this small planet, is the Babel-question. Why should *homo sapiens sapiens*, genetically and physiologically uniform in almost all respects, subject to identical biological–environmental constraints and evolutionary possibilities, speak thousands of mutually incomprehensible tongues, some of which are set only a few miles apart? The material, economic, social advantages of using a single language are blatant. The thorn-barriers posed by reciprocal incomprehension, by the need to acquire a second or third language, often of formidable phonetic and grammatical difficulty and ‘strangeness’, are evident. There is an elementary and elemental challenge to reflection here largely ignored as either formless or insoluble by most of academic linguistics (even as the famous question of the origins of human language had, until very recently, been ruled out of ‘scientific’ court).

After Babel adduces the Darwinian analogy: that of the plethora of organic species. Are there structural parallels between the ten thousand species of insects to be found in a corner of Amazonia, say, and the numbing proliferation of languages spoken on the Indian subcontinent or in those very same regions of the Amazon rain-forests? At the first level, the analogy breaks down. The Darwinian paradigm is one of evolutionary benefit. As they emerge competitively, different life-forms, however specialized, however minutely distinct, occupy different niches in the environment. Their proliferation augments the chances of precise adjustment and biological progress. No such profit accrues from the seemingly anarchic multiplicity of mutually non-communicating tongues. On the contrary: there is no mythology known to us in which the fragmentation of some initial single language (the Adamic motif) into jagged bits, into cacophony and incommunicado, has not been felt to be a catastrophe, a divine chastisement on some opaque motion of rebellion or arrogance in fallen man. Even at a glance, the disasters, be they economic, political, or social, which have attended on the thousandfold ‘babbling after Babel’ are palpable.

But there is, at a second level, a seminal suggestion to be found in Darwinian models. *After Babel* argues that it is the constructive powers of language to conceptualize the world which have been

crucial to man's survival in the face of ineluctable biological constraints, this is to say in the face of death. It is the miraculous—I do not retract the term—capacity of grammars to generate counter-factuals, 'if'-propositions and, above all, future tenses, which have empowered our species to hope, to reach far beyond the extinction of the individual. 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. It is in this precise sense that the utopian and the messianic are figures of syntax.

Each human language maps the world differently. There is life-giving compensation in the extreme grammatical complication of those languages (for example, among Australian Aboriginals or in the Kalahari) whose speakers dwell in material and social contexts of deprivation and barrenness. 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. Thus there is, at the level of human psychic resources and survivance, an immensely positive, 'Darwinian' logic in the otherwise baffling and negative excess of languages spoken on the globe. When a language dies, a possible world dies with it. There is here no survival of the fittest. Even where it is spoken by a handful, by the harried remnants of destroyed communities, a language contains within itself the boundless potential of discovery, of re-compositions of reality, of articulate dreams, which are known to us as myths, as poetry, as metaphysical conjecture and the discourse of the law. Inherent in *After Babel* is 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.

Paradoxically, a comparable force for uniformity characterizes the claims of transformational generative grammars. Paradoxically, because the politics of Noam Chomsky have been anti-imperialist in the extreme. The axiom of universal deep structures, innate in the brain (though in ways never defined and, indeed, ruled as beyond rational investigation), entails inevitably a relegation to