

GEORGE STEINER (1929–)

“The Hermeneutic Motion”

Keywords:

aggression, hermeneutic motion, hermeneutics, incorporation, restitution, translation, trust

1. Author information

George Steiner is a literary critic, essayist, professor, translator and author, often called a polymath. He was born in Paris on 23 April 1929 to Jewish Viennese parents. Since his mother was multilingual, he was raised with three mother tongues: German, English and French.

His formal education started in Paris, then continued in New York as his family fled from the Nazis. Then he studied in such universities as the University of Chicago, Harvard and Oxford. Later in his life, he obtained numerous awards and honours from various colleges and other institutions. He has also been an academic teacher at Oxford, Harvard and Cambridge universities. Moreover, he has written articles for *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, *The Times Literary Supplement* and *The Guardian*.

His works include essays, non-fiction and fiction. The most recognised book of his, *After Babel*, is also a contribution to translation studies. It was adapted for television in 1977 as *The Tongues of Men*. *After Babel* is a dense study on language and translation with plenty of different examples. “(...) it was the first thorough study of the subject (...), it has still not been surpassed in depth or breadth in the three decades since publication” (<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth234>). The article *The Hermeneutic Motion* is included in one of the chapters.

His most recognized works are:

Steiner, G.1952. *Fantasy Poets Number Eight*. Eynsham: Fantasy Press.

- 1960. *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast*, London: Faber and Faber
- 1961. *The Death of Tragedy*, London: Faber and Faber.
- 1962. *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- 1975. *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 1977. *Contemporary Approaches to English Studies*, London. Portsmouth: Heinemann Education.
- 1996. *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1996*, London: Faber and Faber.
- 2008. *My Unwritten Books*, New York: New Directions.
- 2008. *George Steiner at The New Yorker*, New York: New Directions.

2. Abstract

George Steiner's aim was to criticize the hermeneutic motion as it had been known hitherto, i.e. a threefold problem, and to present how he perceived it. In his opinion, there are four parts of the hermeneutic look at translation, which he wanted to comment on and explain.

The text consists of twelve paragraphs. Each one of them discusses either one of the steps of the hermeneutic motion or, in the final part, some aspects of translation itself.

The introduction is about hermeneutics in general and its essential point, which is trust. Then the author presents all four steps of the hermeneutic motion: trust – already mentioned, aggression (penetration), incorporation (embodiment) and restitution.

Trust assumes that “there is something there” to translate, even if, at first glance, it seems to the translator that there is hardly any meaning in the text.

Aggression is a dynamic step. According to Steiner, comprehension in translation is “invasive and exhaustive” (Steiner 2000: 187).

Incorporation is an embodiment of meaning. A new form has to be created and it does not come from or into a vacuum. The native semantic field is an expanded entity.

Last but not least, restitution. It means that there needs to be a balance between the text in the source language and its translation in the target language.

Having discussed the fourfold hermeneutic motion, Steiner goes on to consider various results of translation, fidelity and, in the end, he emphasizes that the triadic model of hermeneutics, which has been dominant for years, is incomplete.

3. Terminology¹:

dialectic	the art of investigating or discussing the truth of opinions; enquiry into metaphysical contradictions and their solutions	dialektyka
fidelity	the degree of exactness with which something is copied or reproduced	wierność
glossolalia	the phenomenon of (apparently) speaking in an unknown language, especially in religious worship. It is practised especially by Pentecostal and charismatic Christians	glosolalia
hermeneutics	“the investigation of what it means to ‘understand’ a piece of oral or written speech, and the attempt to diagnose	hermeneutyka

¹ All definitions, except for the first one, come from Oxford Dictionary.

	this process in terms of a general model of meaning” (Steiner quoted in Munday 2001: 163)	
language acquisition	learning and developing a language	przyswajanie języka
literalism	the interpretation of words in their literal sense	dosłowność
matrix	the cultural, social, or political environment in which something develops	matryca
monad	an indivisible and hence ultimately simple entity, such as an atom or a person	monada
ontology	the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being	ontologia
phenomenology	an approach that concentrates on the study of consciousness and the objects of direct experience	fenomenologia
pidgin	a grammatically simplified form of a language, typically English, Dutch, or Portuguese, some elements of which are taken from local languages, used for communication between people not sharing a common language	pidżyn

4. Methodology

Steiner’s thesis, which is opposed to the dominant triadic hermeneutic motion, can be seen in the first sentence: “The hermeneutic motion, the act of elicitation and appropriative transfer of meaning, is fourfold” (Steiner 2000: 186). Then, he proves this and concludes the whole essay.

5. Links with other publications on the subject

The term *hermeneutics* appears in ancient philosophy (Greek *hermēneuein* ‘to interpret’). It was discussed by many philosophers, mainly by Martin Heidegger and his followers: Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer (*Truth and Method*). However, Steiner focuses on a specific use of hermeneutics – in translation.

6. Critical commentary

In my opinion the text deals with important aspects of translation. It elaborates four ways of this process and describes them in a comprehensible manner with examples illustrating each step. There are comparisons with other authors’ notions both to criticize and to approve them. The structure of the text is clear, intelligible and logical. The article encourages to read some more works of this author, especially *After Babel*, where Steiner discusses not only the hermeneutic notion.

7. Quotation to remember the text by

It is impossible to choose one single thought worth remembering, therefore I have collected a few of them.

“All understanding, and the demonstrative statement of understanding which is translation, starts with an act of trust” (Steiner 2000: 186).

“The translator invades, extracts and brings home” (Steiner 2000: 187).

“No language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed” (Steiner 2000: 188).

“Fidelity is not literalism or any technical device for rendering ‘spirit’” (Steiner 2000: 190).

8. References

Steiner, G. 2000. "The Hermeneutic Motion", in: Lawrence Venuti (ed.) *The Translation Studies Reader*. London. New York: Routledge. 186–191.

Munday, J. 2001. *Introducing Translation Studies: Theories and Applications*. New York: Routledge.

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