

almost every other issue one can think of is raised), namely scientific language. I shall look at these in turn.

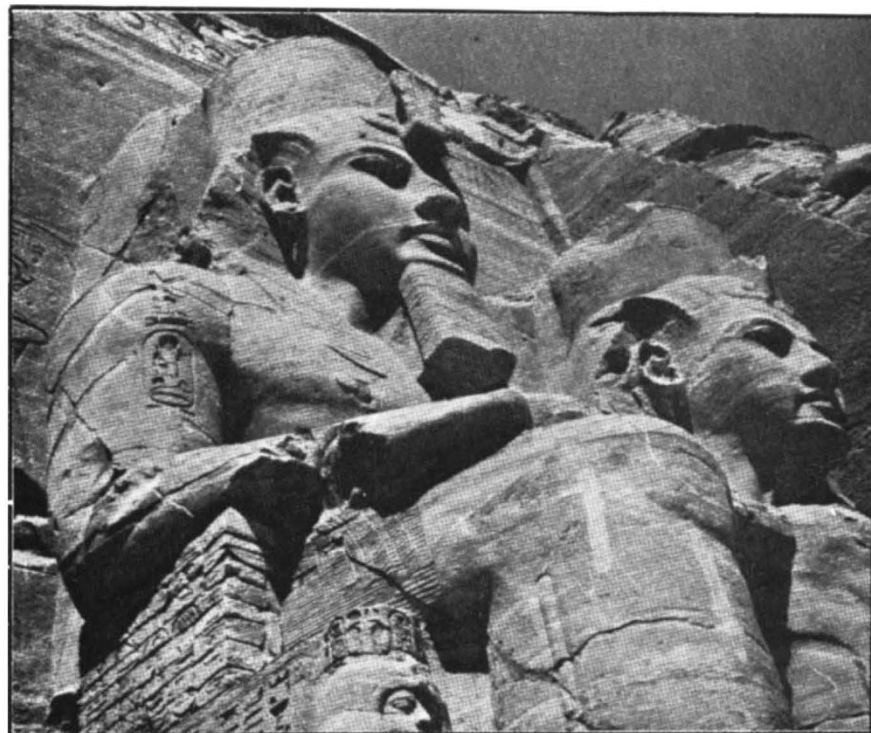
The central theme is the curse of Babel: the diversity of human languages; and the central thesis of the book is that every act of communication requires an interpretation, and that an interpretation is essentially a translation, whether across a language barrier, across a time barrier (as when we attempt to interpret Shakespeare) or across a barrier between individuals or groups. The book opens with a long speech from *Cymbeline*, and Steiner asks in detail what it means to us now. He turns to other passages in similar detail, ending with Noel Coward, always making the same point: a proper interpretation is hard, even at only 40 years' distance, but with the diligent application of critical method it can be done.

Before I confront his thesis briefly, a digression on the style of the book is essential. Under six chapter headings, Steiner raises an enormous number of issues, sometimes more than one on a page: does language determine our actual perception, as Whorf believed; what was Leibniz's view of a universal syntax and how does it relate to Chomsky's; is women's grammar different from men's; what effect had the statement of the second law of thermodynamics on sensibility and speech at large?

These topics are all raised and dropped during nimble and ebullient leaps from name to name and epigram to epigram: "History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense"; "Though the great master Tartakower thought otherwise, we do not ascribe feelings . . . to chess pieces"; "But for all their lively truth, children in the novels of James and Dostoevsky remain in large measure miniature adults. They exhibit the uncanny percipience of the 'aged' infant Christ in Flemish art. Mark Twain's transcriptions of the secret and public idiom of childhood penetrate much farther"; and even, "Sex is a profoundly semantic act".

Something intriguing is almost always being said, but it is seldom developed to a point of clarity, or to where the weight of literary evidence, familiar and arcane, that Steiner marshals can tell against his claims and throwaway remarks in any definite way. For there is no time to analyse and discuss in any depth as the whole vast parade of central European scholarship moves on, usually just at the point where one longs for detailed analysis and more examples.

Even what I called the central thesis is not discussed directly in the way it deserves, so let us return to that for a moment. The point of the thesis is to blur the distinction between interpreta-



The Colossi of Ramses at Abu Simbel, guarding the entrance to a temple penetrating 45 metres into solid rock. Possible evidence that the now barren Nubian desert was once comparatively fertile. From *The Ecology of Oases*. By J. L. Cloudsley-Thompson. Pp. vi+43. (Morrow: Watford, 1974.) £1.25; \$4.40.

tion and translation: between the way an individual confronts his own language and the way different languages confront one another. Steiner gives too much weight to what one might call the Telex view of human understanding: that we sit, as it were, in our private offices trying to interpret language coming in from outside. This view makes human communication seem a problem, and is a recrudescence of an old-fashioned empiricism, one that ignores the essentially performative and social nature of language.

If one rejects the 'Telex view' there seems an essential difference between trying to understand what another speaker of your own language is saying, and doing the same for a different language. In the case of interpretation we have the ability to go on asking someone what he means, to form hypotheses, as it were, and test them in discussion. In the case of translation that is exactly what we do not have, and thus the distinctive problems of translation arise. We are, in general, deprived of just that essential "further elucidation" aspect of language.

Steiner's key examples are of interpreting one's language diachronically: he argues that any English of the past is another language, and similarly for the language of women, of the upper classes, and so on. The heart of the matter is the elusive Wittgensteinian notion of a "form of life": in that we can interpret/translate only if we share

an adequately close form of life with those who are the source of the language. One might say dreamily that it is this background knowledge that workers in artificial intelligence are at present trying to formalise and put into their programs.

A large topic presents itself here that it would have been nice to see Steiner discuss: namely, is science such a form of life, and if so can scientific language transcend other cultural boundaries? The question should have come up in the extended discussion of Whorf and his thesis that different cultures have languages describing essentially different worlds. Steiner might well have brought out that Whorf explicitly extended this thesis to scientific language and argued that a psychologist, physiologist and physicist describing, say, the same brain, are speaking different, not mutually translatable, languages and, in that sense, have different cultures. This seems implausible, for we feel that science is a uniform international culture and language. And yet, had Steiner found room for this topic he would almost certainly have drawn our attention to modern Chinese scientific journals, particularly medical ones, where it is not at all clear that they can be understood outside the Maoist frame of thought.

It is a highly personal, stimulating and infuriating work but, warts and all, a considerable achievement.

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