

KENNETH BURKE

ABOVE THE OVER-TOWERING BABBLE *

The three great wonders are: (1) That there is existence; (2) that some existent entities are organisms experiencing the pleasures and pains of growth and sex; (3) that some sexual existents possess both the need and the ability to master the ways of symbolic action (or, in George Steiner's term, "speech-acts"), as with, for instance, the many varieties of tribal languages. There are other symbol-systems, such as music, dance, painting. But language is especially notable because it is best adapted to discuss itself and symbol-systems in general.

A notable aspect of language is that it makes for a kind of *doubling*. For language variously refers to, or bears upon, or takes form in "contexts of situation" outside itself; and it can convert one symbol-system into another, by translations with varying degrees of literalness or freedom.

George Steiner's book, *After Babel*, is talking sometimes about translation in the literal sense of the term, sometimes about language (which can itself be viewed as a way of "translating" largely non-linguistic "contexts of situation" into linguistic terms). His views on translation proper come to a focus in his chapter, "The Hermeneutic Motion," his views on the "speech-act" of language in pp. 205-235 of his chapter, "Word Against Object." So I shall try, as best I can, to build my review around the gist of those two sections, in that order though in the book itself the section on language comes first.

"The hermeneutic motion, the act of elicitation and appropri-

* *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, by George Steiner. Oxford University Press. 507 pp. \$17.50.