

GEORGE STEINER

Francis George Steiner

23 April 1929 – 3 February 2020

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1998

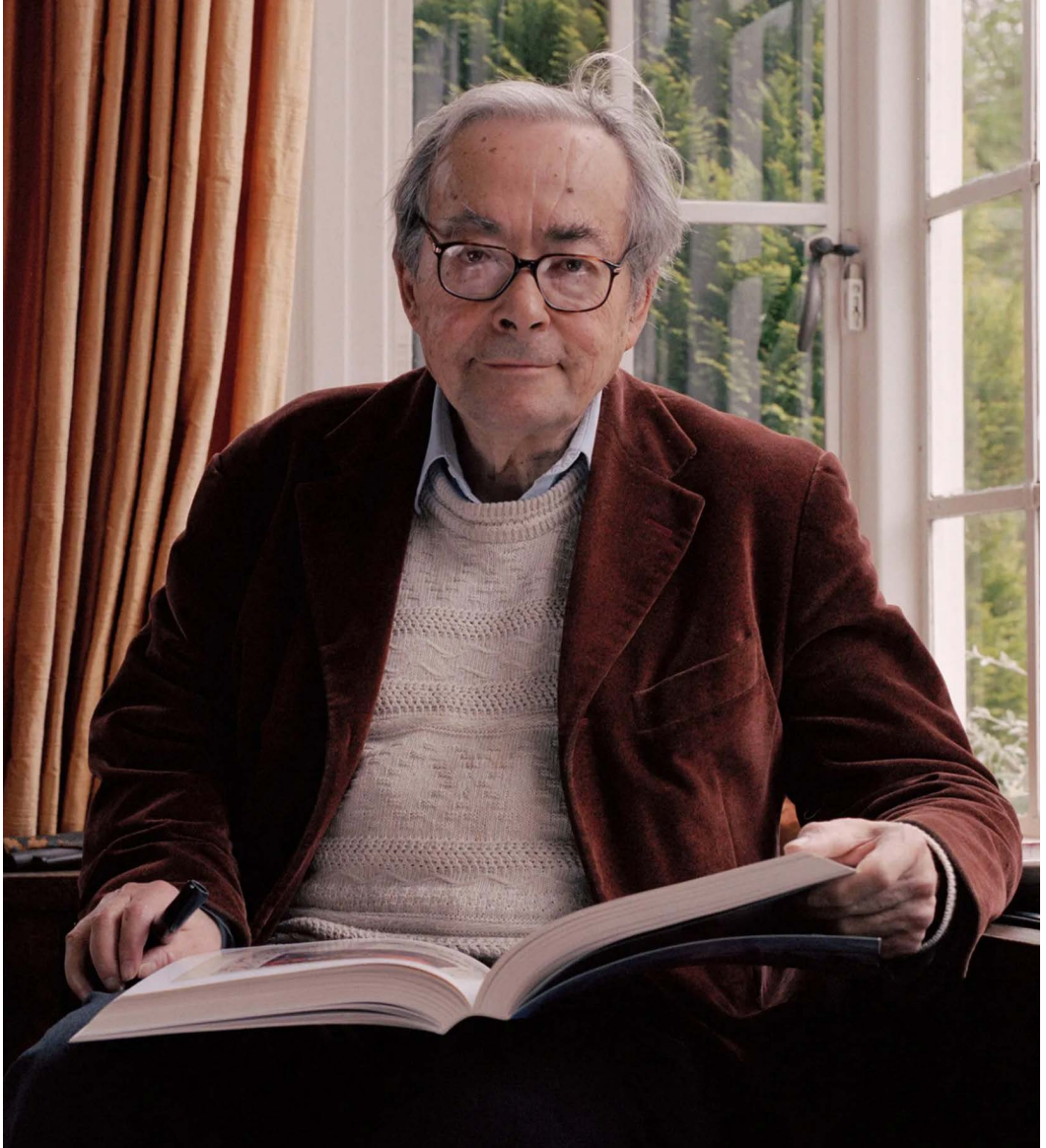
by

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George Steiner was the very archetype of the European intellectual. Born in Paris in 1929 to Austrian parents, he fled with his Jewish family to New York in 1940, barely escaping the Shoah. He went on to become a deeply influential literary and cultural critic, holding the Chair of Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva as well as numerous Visiting Professorships across the world. Among his many landmark studies are *After Babel* (1975), *Grammars of Creation* (2001), and *The Poetry of Thought* (2011) – all of which convey Steiner's conviction that the humanities express the best, but are incapable of hindering the worst, of humanity.



Lucy Steiner

What good are writers in destitute times? Anyone who even attempts to answer Friedrich Hölderlin's question in the context of the 20th century must reckon with the work of George Steiner. Others have arguably been more influential in shaping the discipline of comparative literature, but no one has embodied it quite so flamboyantly: famously trilingual, ferociously high-cultural, Steiner was the very archetype of the European intellectual, unyielding in his conviction that the humanities express the best – but do not necessarily hinder the worst – of humanity. By turns intimidating and engaging, perspicacious and pompous, Steiner challenged us to keep up, to range more widely, to aspire to a quasi-Olympian manifesto of the mind – *citius, altius, fortius* – beyond our ambient mediocrity. In an age of popular culture, Steiner remained, unapologetically, 'elitist'.

That the term now comes quarantined with quotation marks was not the least of his preoccupations. When someone dies at the age of ninety, it is inevitable that their achievements should seem a thing of the past, and so it is with Steiner: the age not just of Europeanism, but also of elitism, seems ever more to have ended with the 20th century. Such elegies, however, already characterised Steiner's own engagement with the cultural canon, fatally compromised as it was, in his view, by the black hole of the Holocaust. If Steiner became a leading tenant of what György Lukács described as the 'Grand Hotel Abyss' of the post-war German intelligentsia – 'a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity' – he was in good company.¹ As obituarists were not slow to point out upon his death in February 2020, Steiner equalled the likes of Theodor Adorno, Leo Spitzer, and Jean Starobinski in both linguistic range and intellectual ambition.

That Steiner can be mentioned in the same breath as such figures owes much to the unusual circumstances of his childhood: the son of Austrian parents, he received a classical French education in a modern American setting. Above all, of course, Steiner was Jewish, a cultural identity without which his work would have been – quite literally – unthinkable.

Childhood and education

George Steiner was born in the Parisian suburb of Neuilly-sur-Seine on 23 April 1929. His parents were Jewish immigrants who, in 1924, had left Vienna where Steiner's father, Dr Frederick George Steiner, already in a senior position in the Austrian Central Bank, was wary of a deep-seated anti-Semitism. Steiner would later reflect

¹ György Lukács, 'Preface', *The Theory of the Novel*, tr. Anna Bostock (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1971), p. 22.

that his mother, Else Steiner (née Franzos), remained ‘Viennese to her fingertips’ and that his father never felt at home in French financial and political circles.² He observed that, although an investment banker, his father’s ‘innermost passions’ were for reading and languages and intellectual history. This in turn shaped the advice given to his son, namely that he should pursue scholarship: ‘I would rather that you did not know the difference between a bond and a share’, is how Steiner records his father’s steer in his autobiographical *Errata: An Examined Life*. ‘I was to be a teacher’, mused Steiner, reminding his reader that ‘the word *rabbi* simply means “teacher”’.³

Growing up trilingual (German, French and English), Steiner was a pupil at the Lycée Janson-le-Sailly in Paris’s 16th arrondissement in 1940 when his father, in New York on an economic mission on behalf of the French government, secured its permission for his family to visit New York. The young Steiner, his sister Lilian, and their mother left from Genoa as the German army invaded France.⁴ Most of the remaining Jewish pupils at Janson-le-Sailly would die in the Holocaust. Writing in *Language and Silence* (1965), Steiner would look back on the plight of children he had grown up with and who had perished. He argued that although he had been in America at the time of the war, ‘in another sense I am a survivor, and not intact. [...] The black mystery of what happened in Europe is to me indivisible from my own identity. [...] An accident of good fortune struck my name from the roll’.⁵

In New York, Steiner studied at the Lycée Français in Manhattan. The school hosted occasional lectures given by French intellectuals in exile at the time, among them Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Maritain, and Étienne Gilson. Stimulated by these talks, the young Steiner felt the early stirrings of intellectual life. He was one of a group of three pupils who received a weekly class in Ancient Greek from Jean Boorsch, who lectured in French Literature at Yale. He would later see Boorsch, aloof and magisterial, as the teacher who drew him into ‘the magnetism of philology’.⁶

Steiner was acutely aware of the tense atmosphere of the Lycée, which remained *pétainiste* until the middle of 1944 and then rapidly switched to supporting De Gaulle. He would later describe the school as being ‘a cauldron’, with the children of Vichy officials sitting alongside pupils who were refugees from Nazism. Two pupils in the year above him who had lied about their age managed to get back to France to join the

²George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (London: Phoenix, 1998 (1997)), p. 9.

³See *Errata*, pp. 11–12.

⁴‘Memoranda’, in *Steiner* (Paris: Éditions de l’Hermès, 2003) ed. Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, pp. 402–5 (p. 403).

⁵‘A Kind of Survivor’, reproduced in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 220–34 (p. 220).

⁶*Errata*, p. 123.

Resistance and were killed by the Waffen-SS in the Vercors.⁷ While the syllabus was very traditional, the young Steiner welcomed the emphasis placed on high literature. Yet, as he would later recall, his introduction to the world of Racine's *Bérénice* ('that most flawless of tragedies') was inseparable from news of Nazi atrocities reaching the Lycée.⁸ As Steiner observed, *Bérénice*'s line of farewell, 'Pour la dernière fois, adieu, Seigneur', gave him his 'first and lasting grasp of the tenor of death'.⁹

Following the cessation of hostilities, Steiner went on to study in a rollcall of leading anglophone universities: Yale, Chicago, Harvard, and Oxford. His time at the University of Chicago was especially formative. Under Robert Maynard Hutchins's progressive leadership, Chicago offered students younger than the usual college age – as well as many returning GI's – a broad, fundamental education across the arts, history, and philosophy, an education that was particularly propitious for someone of Steiner's incipient interests. Many years later, Steiner would happily recall the 'passionate electricity of spirit' in post-war Chicago,¹⁰ with its wide range of subjects and (what we would now call) interdisciplinary ethos. None of the institutions where he later studied or taught could match this; all of them, it seems, were measured against it. Steiner would be forced to recreate such formative intellectual ambition in his own writing.

After graduating with his BA in 1948, Steiner took an MA at Harvard in 1950, upon completion of which he moved to Balliol College as a Rhodes Scholar. His time in Oxford culminated in the rejection of his doctoral thesis on account of its cavalier attitude to academic research: footnotes, references, and bibliography were all missing, to the extent that the *viva voce* examination resembled nothing so much as 'the battle of Waterloo'.¹¹ (Despite this, Steiner's doctoral thesis formed the basis for his most important early work, published by Faber in 1961 as *The Death of Tragedy*.) Between 1952 and 1956, Steiner was employed as a member of the editorial staff of *The Economist*, in which capacity he was sent to interview the notoriously irascible Robert Oppenheimer at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Princeton. Oppenheimer, implausibly, took a shine to the young journalist, offering him a fellowship on the spot on the basis of a chance discussion about Plato and philology.¹² After several happy years on the East Coast – among others, serving as Christian Gauss Lecturer at Princeton from 1959 to 1960 – in 1961 Steiner returned to the UK and was appointed to Churchill College, Cambridge.

The connection with Churchill College was to form a central plank of Steiner's

⁷ *Errata*, pp. 27–8.

⁸ *George Steiner: A Reader*, p. 22.

⁹ *Errata*, p. 31.

¹⁰ George Steiner, 'An Examined Life', in *George Steiner at the New Yorker* (New York: New Directions, 2009), pp. 316–24, here p. 317. See also *Errata*, ch. 4.

¹¹ George Steiner, *Entretiens avec Ramin Jahanbegloo* (Paris: Le Félin, 1992/2009), p. 51.

¹² For Steiner's recollection of this encounter, see *Entretiens avec Ramin Jahanbegloo*, pp. 55–60.

academic career. Taking up his Fellowship in 1961, the year in which Churchill welcomed its first undergraduates, Steiner was one of the Founder Fellows of the College as well as its Director of English Studies. One undergraduate applicant wishing to study History recalls being advised to read English instead, ‘and not miss the chance of being taught by our remarkable new Fellow from America’.¹³ Yet Steiner was to be unsuccessful in his application for a University lectureship in English at Cambridge in 1969 – a controversial outcome thrown into relief by the international acclaim he subsequently enjoyed and by the many Visiting Professorships that came with it, including at Princeton, Stanford, Yale, and Harvard, where he held the Eliot Norton Professorship of Poetics.

Steiner regarded Churchill College as his haven, as a source of great support during times when he felt sidelined elsewhere (his papers are today held in the Churchill Archives Centre). During his tenure of posts abroad, he was able to avail himself of the College’s category of ‘Extraordinary Fellow’ which did not bring with it a requirement to be living in Cambridge. He held this role between 1969 and 1996, thereafter becoming an Emeritus Fellow.

In the early decades of Churchill College, Steiner’s national and international profile singled him out as the most visible of its Fellows on the Humanities side. As one long-standing Churchill Fellow informed the authors of this obituary, Steiner was a formidable and imposing presence in the College and ‘somewhat proprietorial, in the manner of a village elder, in instructing neophytes on the true essence of the Founders’ intentions’.

Another Founder Fellow at Churchill was C.P. Snow, the scientist and novelist whose 1959 Rede Lecture at Cambridge (subsequently published under the title ‘The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution’) aroused considerable debate. Steiner was a friend of Snow’s and energetically promoted the College’s commitment to science and technology. He led a group of Churchill Fellows to hear F.R. Leavis’s controversial riposte to Snow in the Richmond Lecture at Downing College in 1962 and then staged a walkout from the event. Writing in *Language and Silence* (1965), Steiner complained of ‘parochialism and retrenchment from reality’ in England’s academic establishment and expressed frustration at the narrowness of the Cambridge English degree, pressing the case for comparative studies as a counter to ‘chauvinism and isolation’. Recalling Steiner’s style of teaching in the 1960s, one of his Churchill undergraduates remembers how ‘in supervisions, his enthusiasms were stunning and global. He had several characteristic words of emphatic praise: a given text was “prodigal”, or presented valuable “difficulty”, or had immense “possibilities” or was even “peregrine”. English works must surely be understood in their European context. How could we appreciate Hardy’s

¹³Richard Holmes, ‘A Teacher of Genius, an Intellectual Star: Remembering George Steiner’, *Churchill Review* (Volume 57A), 2020.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles without having “at least some sense of” Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, or Fontane’s *Effi Briest*? Besides, the question of cultural translation (“to carry across ... but also to carry back”) was crucial.¹⁴ Steiner’s comparatism also extended beyond the field of literary study. He saw in linguistics and the theory of communication a fruitful terrain, ‘intermediate between the arts and sciences, a terrain bordering equally on poetry, on sociology, on psychology, on logic, and even on mathematics’.¹⁵

For some of his students, Steiner’s withered right arm (which he had been born with) was part of his aura as a teacher. One of them recalls him holding up a first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in his right hand and telling his lecture-theatre audience that this little book had changed the course of European literature. (Steiner would elsewhere reflect that his mother, refusing to let him be left-handed, insisted that he learn to tie his shoe laces, a maternal lesson in overcoming life’s challenges.)

Towards the redefinition of culture

For all the subsequent acclaim, for all the Visiting Professorships and Honorary Doctorates that piled up over the years, it is fair to say that Steiner continued to feel embattled and resented throughout much of his career, a generalist in an era of specialists. Underlying such resentment – beyond the standard suspicion of comparative literature as a discipline that encroaches, by definition, on numerous highly defended territories – was the sense that Steiner was just a bit too dazzling for Anglophone ears. Such dazzle was, of course, the very essence of the Steiner sound. The magisterial tone, the cosmopolitan content, the assumption that the reader was as intimately familiar with the history of European literature and philosophy as he was: it all went to form the ‘aura’ of his work of criticism. ‘I take comparative literature to be, at best, an exact and exacting art of reading, a style of listening to oral and written acts of language’.¹⁶ In pursuit of such exaction, names were dropped like confetti, sprinkled from such a height that at times they inevitably missed their target. But Steiner was interested in big pictures, not small incisions. His lapidary name could not have suited him better: to Steiner was to pass judgement from on high, to set in stone an imperious, almost impersonal verdict on our human, all too human failings. The rhetorical tics, the opacities and *ex cathedra* proclamations – recurring formulations such as ‘there is a sense in which...’ that artfully combine both certainty and uncertainty – were part of Steiner’s project: to re-enchant culture with metaphysical pathos.

¹⁴The authors are grateful to Richard Holmes for sharing this memory.

¹⁵*George Steiner: A Reader*, pp. 32–3.

¹⁶George Steiner, ‘What is Comparative Literature?’, in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978–1996* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), pp. 142–59, here p. 150.

Theology underpinned his aesthetics; even before he explicitly addressed it in *Real Presences* (1991), Steiner had long implicitly argued that genuine creativity presupposes some form of belief in God. In the words of the novelist A.S. Byatt, Steiner was a ‘late, late, late Renaissance man, [...] a European metaphysician with an instinct for the driving ideas of our time’.

Yet God, scandalously, had abandoned Europe in the 1940s. From his earliest work onwards – *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky* (1959), *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) – Steiner’s vision of the human condition was decidedly postlapsarian. By the time he gave the T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures at the University of Kent, published as *In Bluebeard’s Castle* (1971), he set out to relate ‘the dominant phenomenon of twentieth-century barbarism to a more general theory of culture’.¹⁷ How could the Buchenwald concentration camp be located next to Weimar? How could Goethe be harnessed to genocide? Controversially, Steiner argued that the Holocaust represented the revenge of Western culture on those who had submitted it to ‘the blackmail of transcendence’:¹⁸ the moral demands of Judaism – its monotheistic self-abnegation, its Utopian promise – were simply too much for Christian Europe, quivering in resentment at its own inadequacies. European culture had become complicit, catastrophically, in its own capitulation. The question now was how to justify its continuing purpose: as Steiner’s Eliotic subtitle indicated, ‘some notes towards the redefinition of culture’ were long overdue. If all philosophy is a footnote to Plato, Steiner effectively suggested, then all theology is now a footnote to the Shoah.

Around the same time that he was struggling to re-articulate the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, Steiner’s work took a markedly linguistic turn. In 1975, he published the book that many still view as his masterpiece, *After Babel*, a virtuoso study of the power of language – and in particular, of *literary* language – to shape thought. All speech is an act of translation, Steiner argues; any reading of a text is a ‘manifold act of interpretation’. Steiner’s own readings lend an Empsonian ear to a dizzying range of ambiguities: his epigraphs alone – substantial citations in German, Spanish, and French from Heidegger, Borges, and Meschonnic – suggest the extent of his vaulting ambition. The seeming humility of his subtitle ‘Aspects of Language and Translation’ stands in contrast to his aim: just as he sought to redefine our understanding of culture, so he seeks to re-establish our grasp of hermeneutics. *After Babel*, unsurprisingly, became a foundational text for the emerging field of translation studies.

At the other end of the spectrum, and to some extent underpinning this study, was Steiner’s exploration of the relationship between language and silence. As articulated most obviously in the essays published under this title in 1967, Steiner saw the absence

¹⁷ George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 31.

¹⁸ Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, p. 40.

of language – whether in music, mysticism, or mute indigence – as the ultimate guarantor of meaning. Throughout his life, he maintained a strong interest in chess and music, two forms of expression that are pointedly *non-linguistic*. He observed that, like mathematics, chess and music ‘are resplendently useless [...]. They refuse to relate outward, to take reality for arbiter’.¹⁹ ‘The invention of melody’, he liked to cite Claude Lévi-Strauss as saying, ‘is the supreme mystery in the sciences of man’.²⁰ For Steiner, the only true response to the contemporary debasement of linguistic expression – to our ‘retreat from the word’ – is to retreat into silence, or, what amounts to the same thing, into our own ‘private language’. That he did not actually take this step (like so many others who have advocated such a course of action) tells its own story about our irrepressibly human need to communicate. Even the non-encounter – Hegel and Hölderlin, Heidegger and Celan – must happen through words.

Geneva

In 1974, Steiner was appointed Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva, a post which he occupied until 1994. The Chair had first been occupied in the 19th century by Sismondi, a political refugee from Italy who, as Steiner reflected with identitarian relish in a Swiss television interview, ‘avait le talent de l’exil’ [had a gift for exile].²¹ The novelist Michel Butor arrived in Geneva round about the same time to take up the Chair of French Literature. The two appointments were the work of the then Dean of the Faculté des Lettres, Bernard Gagnebin, whose aim, as Steiner later recalled with pleasure, was to position Geneva as a university for Europe, located in a free and tolerant country. In the landmark *Steiner* volume published in Paris in 2003 by the Cahiers de l’Herne, Steiner remembered with immense fondness his teaching routine at Geneva which had begun thirty years earlier. The audience for his weekly lectures on Shakespeare in the aula of the University regularly drew ‘les troisième et quatrième âges de la ville’ [the third and fourth ages of the city], diplomats working at the United Nations, and visitors from Paris; and Thursday morning was the slot for his seminar for doctoral students and others.²² Alexis Philonenko, the French Professor of Philosophy who taught at the Universities of Rouen and Geneva, described attending one of Steiner’s lectures on Shakespeare and being struck by the rhythm in his diction and the sense of melody in his reading of Shakespeare. He added

¹⁹ ‘A Death of Kings’, reproduced in *George Steiner: A Reader*, p. 174.

²⁰ See, for instance, George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), p. 20.

²¹ ‘Les Grands Entretiens: George Steiner’ (1998), RTS, a series of thirteen interviews with Guillaume Chenevière (interview 8: ‘Cambridge et Genève’, 13 November 1998).

²² ‘Memoranda’, p. 404.

that Monique Philonenko (whose English was much better than his) marvelled at the beauty of Steiner's delivery: 'Comme c'est beau!', she enthused.²³

In the same account of Steiner's Geneva years, Philonenko observed that losing his audience was part of the pain felt by Steiner on his retirement from the University there. In Steiner's own words, teaching was, for him, 'indispensable'.²⁴ He described his Thursday morning seminar, which ran for a quarter of a century, as having become 'le centre de ma vocation, de mes bonheurs quadrilingues, de mes recherches' [the centre of my vocation, of my quadrilingual happiness, of my research].²⁵ (Beyond the three languages of his childhood, he had now also acquired Italian.) A number of Steiner's works, beginning with *After Babel* (1975), would be published during his time at the University of Geneva. In a 2011 interview with Juliette Cerf for France's 'Télérama', he reflected on how his multilingualism had helped him to teach and to feel at home wherever he was. Multilingualism, he added, had provided the platform for the writing of *After Babel*. Referring to the 'terrible enracinement' [awful rootedness] of a Maurice Barrès and to the strictures of nationalism, Steiner affirmed his preference for cultural mobility.²⁶ He wrote of his 'plurality of convictions across borders' and cast himself as 'a grateful wanderer' who 'sought to press on my students and readers (the rewards were greatest in polyglot Geneva) that which is "other", which puts in doubt the primacy of household gods'.²⁷ (His curiosity about languages could also take a mischievous turn, as when, in an evening lecture delivered back when he was teaching in Cambridge, he playfully recalled having chided his wife for not telling him what language he had used when he exclaimed as she drove into a tree!) Written in English, his books came to be translated into many languages, with a good number of the French translations being undertaken by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat. As a cultural location, Geneva had made possible for Steiner 'cette "centralité" polyglotte, ainsi qu'une rencontre et une amitié qui a éclairé ma vie' [that polyglot 'centrality' as well as an encounter and friendship that lit up my life].²⁸

The geographical location of Geneva was also much to Steiner's liking. He observed that the mountains were close by and that it was only in or near mountains that he felt 'really at home in my own skin'. He enjoyed mountain-walking and suggested somewhat grandly that with this love came a set of philosophical, musical, and aesthetic choices, that mountains might impart 'a darker, more selective view of man' than the sea and coastal locations.²⁹

²³ Alexis Philonenko, 'Steiner et la philosophie', in *Steiner* pp. 27–58 (p. 28).

²⁴ *Errata*, p. 141.

²⁵ 'Memoranda', p. 404.

²⁶ <https://www.telerama.fr/idees/george-steiner-l-europe-est-en-train-de-sacrifier-ses-jeunes,75871.php>; consulted 30 March 2021.

²⁷ *Errata*, p. 37.

²⁸ 'Memoranda', p. 405.

²⁹ *George Steiner: A Reader*, p. 18.

The good postman

While post-structuralism and deconstruction dominated French intellectual thought during Steiner's time at Geneva, he remained resolutely opposed to the methods underpinning modern critical theory. In *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (1989), which would soon be translated into French, Steiner called for the need to 're-experience the life of meaning in the text, in music, in art'. These forms, he insisted, 'relate us most directly to that in being which is not ours'.³⁰ Alexis Philonenko, for one, viewed *Real Presences* as Steiner's most important book, while also stressing its connectedness with his earlier works: in Philonenko's configuration of his colleague's *œuvre*, *After Babel* addresses the question of 'Que puis-je savoir? [What can I know?], *Antigones* that of 'What must I do? [“Que dois-je faire?”], while *Real Presences* asks the question 'Que puis-je espérer?' [What can I hope?]. Taken together, the three strands constitute a reflection on what it is to be human.³¹

Sketching an often caustic summary of the post-structuralist stance, Steiner was outspoken, in *Real Presences*, about what he termed 'a universe of games in which semiotic structures and their messages are boundless, often discontinuous chains of differentiation and deferral'. Decrying what he saw as 'the breach of contract with the old ghosts of meaning and meaning-fulness', he characterised as nihilistic the process whereby a painting, a poem, or a piece of music became 'the *pre-text* to and for the commentary'. Forthright in his defence of classical humanism, Steiner was no less categorical about what he labelled 'a democracy of equivocation, [...] the hermeneutics of "do-it-yourself"'.³² In his 1996 preface to the second edition of his early work *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, Steiner squarely rejected the view that critical exegesis might have the same weight as the work of art. As he remarked, literary criticism is 'derivative': Tolstoy and Dostoevsky do not need George Steiner or Jacques Derrida.³³ He remained committed to the idea that criticism must work in the service of the work of art, must stand as an act of love and indebtedness in relation to it, as he underlined on the opening page of *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*. Advocating a 'politics of the primary', Steiner cautioned against forms of reading and criticism that heralded 'the dominance of the secondary';³⁴ recalling Pushkin's insistence that it was he, Pushkin, who 'wrote the letters', Steiner cast the critic in a facilitating role. As he remarked with characteristic verve in a 2009 interview:

³⁰ *Real Presences* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 49–50, 226. *Réelles Présences. Les arts du sens* was published by Gallimard in 1991 (trans. Michel R. de Pauw).

³¹ Philonenko, 'Steiner et la philosophie', p. 40.

³² *Real Presences*, pp. 124–26.

³³ See Steiner, *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in the Old Criticism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996 (1959)), pp. xiii–xiv.

³⁴ Steiner, *Real Presences*, pp. 6, 7.

‘J’ai essayé d’être un bon facteur’ [I have tried to be a good postman].³⁵ In his influential work as a critic (notably for the *New Yorker*, as well as for the *Times Literary Supplement*), Steiner spent decades bringing European post to an Anglophone audience. So successful was he in doing so, indeed, that the correspondence cut both ways: his identification, writing in the *TLS* in 1973, of the ‘Suhrkamp culture’ of West Germany, became a cliché of the Federal Republic, gleefully marketed as such by the Suhrkamp publisher, Siegfried Unseld. Steiner was a man of letters in several senses of the term.

As a writer of fiction, however, he was arguably less successful. His various short stories and novels – the best known of which, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1981), imagined Hitler alive in the Amazon jungle thirty years after the war – struggled with the classic problem of the fiction of ideas, namely, how to avoid strangling the fiction with the ideas. Undoubtedly he also suffered from a general perception (and possibly also self-perception) of Steiner the critic, rather than of Steiner the writer; gamekeepers rarely get a fair hearing as poachers. It remains the case, however, that the fiction was largely deemed too cerebral, at least for an English-language readership more used to novels of society than of ideas.

Such differences in modes of creativity were given sustained consideration in one of Steiner’s strongest later works, *Grammars of Creation* (2001). Like several of his best books, it was based upon a series of lectures, and it retains the strengths of the oral form, its dynamism and interrogative address. What does it mean to create? What is the difference between creativity and inventiveness? Here as elsewhere, Steiner is at his best when pursuing such questions into the very sinews of syntax: distinguishing, in a manner that betrays his French education in rhetoric, between the differing etymologies of *creatio* (‘engender’), *inventio* (‘discover’), and *figo* (‘form’), he argues that grammatical categories such as subjunctives and future tenses testify to the power of the human imagination – and that this power, in turn, is at the heart of the human condition. I create, therefore I am.

This relationship between ideas and their modes of expression – between form and content – recurs as the central concern of Steiner’s final major work, *The Poetry of Thought* (2011). Language, one last time, remains his principal object of enquiry: how do writers think, how do thinkers write? The answer, of course, is in words, and Steiner shows, through his customary range of examples from Lucretius to Celan, from Heraclitus to René Char, just how much the limits of our language are the limits of our world. Perhaps surprisingly, the abiding influence is not that of the Jewish exile Wittgenstein, but rather that of the Nazi apologist Heidegger, to whose work Steiner wrote an influential introduction in 1979 in the Fontana Modern Masters series. In this as in other regards,

³⁵In conversation with Laure Adler, ‘À voix nue’, France-Culture, a series of five interviews, first broadcast 2009 (episode 2: 10 February 2009).

Steiner was much more a Continental than an Analytic thinker: like Heidegger, he looked back to the Pre-Socratics for advice on Modernity; like Heidegger, he saw language as the expression, not as the inhibition, of meaning. Their politics may have violently diverged, but their vision of the human being as the language animal consistently converged.

Steiner's own politics, if only of the identity kind, were not without their foibles. His notorious dismissal of the USA as little more than a museum, an 'archive of Eden', can be understood in the context of his unrepentant Europeanism.³⁶ Arguably more problematic is the Western bias of this Europeanism, excluding as it did almost any interaction with literatures or cultures beyond the old continent. Steiner's perspective was also decidedly male, with little room for female voices or achievements. His views on pedagogy, too, were not without controversy, insisting as they did on the fundamentally erotic nature of the teacher-pupil relationship: in his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures *Lessons of the Masters* (2003), for instance, Steiner argued passionately for passion, for the Socratic spark that animates the strongest and most vivid pedagogues. If nothing else, such arguments illustrated the lifelong importance that Steiner accorded to the role of the teacher.

With characteristic expansiveness, Steiner also published, in the year before he turned eighty, the ingeniously titled *My Unwritten Books*, a forum in which a range of subjects that he might well have developed further are mapped out in a series of discrete chapters. One such 'unwritten' work is what Steiner calls his 'animal book': in the chapter 'Of Man and Beast', he writes with intense conviction about environmental degradation and 'catastrophes of climate unleashed by our insensate greed'. Prompting his reader to ponder the 'scarcely examined priority of human eminence', he acknowledges the place of sentimentality and self-indulgence in his description of the family pet, Rowena: human language cannot grasp, he argues, the joy taken in the dog's sleep which 'gives to the house a warm hum, a pervasive pitch of presence'.³⁷

Possible dialogues

Steiner's posthumous legacy as both critic and comparatist – the controversies and debates that his work continues to occasion – were anticipated by his reception during his lifetime. The special number of the *Cahiers de l'Herne* dedicated to Steiner, for instance, was central to the reception given to his work in France, while also drawing in contributions from Italy, England, the US, and Israel. Edited by Pierre-Emmanuel

³⁶ See George Steiner, 'The Archives of Eden', in *No Passion Spent*, pp. 266–303.

³⁷ *My Unwritten Books* (London, Phoenix, 2009 (2008)), pp. 163, 165, 169.

Dauzat, the 414-page volume set out to capture, in the words of the L'Herne publicity blurb, those strands of Steiner's work '(pedagogical, critical, ethical) that find an immense resonance'. The collection also explores corners of his work that had received less critical attention, among them his reflections on Turner, on Yehudi Menuhin, and on poetry. Dauzat stresses that the aim of the other contributors was neither to flatter nor to denounce.³⁸ One of the numerous tributes to Steiner's work was from the poet and translator Yves Bonnefoy, who recalled how, when he was younger and visiting Cambridge and the US, he had bought copies of Steiner's early works. Hearing him lecture in London, Bonnefoy had admired his willingness to go against prevailing critical trends, to reject what Bonnefoy's interlocutors in the L'Herne volume called contemporary 'textolâtrie'.³⁹ But whereas Steiner postulates a link between the creative imagination and what he terms 'a wager on transcendence', 'the wager on God', Bonnefoy set out a different understanding of heightened experience and the idea of presence. For him, 'l'instant de présence [...] nous ouvre [...] l'ici et le maintenant de notre existence' [the moment of presence (...) opens up for us (...) the here and now of our existence].⁴⁰ Bonnefoy thus proposes an alternative to the stress on the transcendent to be found in *Real Presences*. 'Le dieu "encore inconnu"', he suggests, 'c'est l'être humain quand il aura pleinement choisi, s'il le veut bien, de s'incarner dans sa finitude' [The god 'still unknown' is the human being when he will have fully chosen, should he so wish, to become incarnate in his finitude].⁴¹

Two adjacent chapters in the Cahiers de l'Herne volume, one by Bonnefoy and the other by Steiner, draw out their shared interest in processes of translation and cultural transfer. An accomplished translator of Shakespeare, Bonnefoy actively welcomed Steiner's argument that the translations were works in progress. Indeed, Bonnefoy was convinced that a translation could never be seen as definitively completed. For Steiner, Shakespeare's lexicon of 24,000 words formed a polar opposite to the just-over 2,000 words that make up Racine's vocabulary (he frequently reflected on the relatively slight attention paid to Racine in the Anglo-American world, arguing that 'the *spiritus mundi* of English' had failed to accommodate the genius of the French playwright. In a similar way, he argued, the French language had not proved receptive to Elizabethan English).⁴² Cleopatra's 'All's but naught!', uttered on the occasion of the death of Antony, is heralded as miraculous by Steiner, while Bonnefoy reflects on the inadequacy of his own rendering:

³⁸ Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, 'Du Juif errant aux *Errata*', in *Steiner*, pp. 9–19 (p. 17).

³⁹ Yves Bonnefoy, 'Sur la traduction poétique', in *Steiner*, pp. 201–15 (p. 201). Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat and Marc Ruggeri formulated the questions for the dialogue with Bonnefoy.

⁴⁰ Bonnefoy, 'Sur la traduction poétique', p. 203.

⁴¹ Bonnefoy, 'Sur la traduction poétique', p. 206.

⁴² Steiner, 'L'Inadvertance du Dr. Cottard', in *Steiner*, pp. 216–20 (p. 219).

‘Tout n’est que dérision’ – it’s more Racine than Shakespeare, he suggests.⁴³ The collegial dialogue between Steiner and Bonnefoy around what had to be negotiated in the movement between English and French reflected a shared level of deep engagement and seriousness of purpose.

‘Impossible dialogues’

The defence of the great achievements of European culture was inseparable from Steiner’s intense engagement with the same culture’s legacy of barbarism. The inability of the humanities to humanise, as he put it, pointed to a crushing failure which he sought to confront in a variety of ways. A high-profile 2006 roundtable in Paris chaired by Valérie Marin La Meslée provided a forum in which some of these confrontations were explored. The event was jointly organised by the Bibliothèque nationale de France and *Le Magazine littéraire*, which had just dedicated its most recent number to Steiner.⁴⁴ He dialogued on that occasion with Dauzat, who reflected that the work which made Steiner famous in France was *Les Antigones*, published in French translation in 1986.⁴⁵ As the novelist Linda Lê argued in her tribute to Steiner’s work, the ancient Greek *Antigone* does not offer a refuge from time but rather reveals to us something about ourselves.⁴⁶

The June 2006 event at the BnF included a screening of extracts from two earlier encounters in the French media involving Steiner. A 1987 televised discussion with André Glucksmann and others on the subject of the work of Heidegger and his silence on Auschwitz formed the first of these. It was followed by footage from a dialogue between Pierre Boutang and Steiner. Boutang had been a fervent supporter of Pétain during the war and a prominent journalist in those years, writing for the anti-Semitic *Aspects de la France*, the paper of *Action française*. At the 2006 event, Daumat, looking back at the discussion with Boutang, remarked on how measured and patient Steiner had remained as Boutang argued that Pétain should have been accorded the honour of burial with his soldiers. For Daumat, the direct encounter with Boutang, together with the participation in the tense television debate about Heidegger in 1987, reflected in Steiner ‘ce besoin de se confronter au proprement impensable’ [this need to confront the literally unthinkable]. These appearances on French television show Steiner grappling with the forces of anti-Semitism. They capture him drawn into what Daumat referred to as ‘ces dialogues impossibles que vous avez menés’ [those impossible dialogues that you conducted].

⁴³ Bonnefoy, ‘Sur la traduction poétique’, p. 213.

⁴⁴ *Le Magazine littéraire*, number 454, June 2006, ‘George Steiner. La culture contre la barbarie’.

⁴⁵ Steiner, *Les Antigones* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), trans. Philippe Blanchard.

⁴⁶ Linda Lê, ‘Antigone dans un paysage de cris’, in *Steiner*, pp. 148–53 (p. 149).

In the case of the rapprochement with Pierre Boutang, Steiner later acknowledged that the ‘closeness’ had ‘an obvious improbability’ about it. ‘But the debates we have had, both in public and private’, he asserted, ‘are among the stellar hours in my life. We share an utter passion for Scripture and the classics, for poetry and metaphysics. We delight in the kind of teaching that is an act of shared love (I have watched Boutang initiate one of his numerous grandchildren in New Testament Greek)’.⁴⁷ In another conversation between them which took place in April 1996 and which is reproduced in the Cahiers de l’Herne volume, Boutang and Steiner explored the question of evil, original sin, and the issues of love and justice across the Jewish and Christian traditions. The discussion shows them drawn into intense, earnest debate. Steiner remained keenly aware of his paradoxical relationship with Boutang. Impressed by his scholarly brilliance and confessing to feelings of anger at the ways in which Boutang remained a marginalised figure in France, Steiner wondered how all this squared with what Boutang wrote and did in the 1930s and with what ‘his enemies allege, [he did] during the Second World War’.⁴⁸

One of Steiner’s most striking ‘impossible dialogues’ was his response in the 1960s to Lucien Rebatet. A journalist and writer who had aggressively campaigned during the Second World War for French collaboration with the Nazis, Rebatet was sentenced to death in November 1946, having been a leading figure in the virulently anti-Semitic publication *Je suis partout* (his death sentence was commuted the following year). The background to Steiner’s meeting with him requires some reconstruction. Rebatet had recorded in a diary entry for 24 October 1963 how he had enjoyed hearing Steiner speak on French radio on the subject of the novel. Paul Flamand, an editor at the Éditions du Seuil, was Steiner’s interlocutor on that occasion. Just as Steiner did not shy away on other occasions from declaring his admiration for the novels of Louis-Ferdinand Céline or from looking beyond Heidegger’s Nazi past to an appreciation of his philosophy, so, in the radio interview, he argued that Rebatet’s *Les Deux Étendards* (1951) was one of the great French novels of the 20th century. Immediately after the interview, Flamand told Steiner that he could have no future in France, having just endorsed in such a public way a work by Rebatet: ‘C’est foutu pour vous’ [You’ve blown it], Flamand insisted.⁴⁹

Decades later, Steiner would observe that he had initially been seduced by Rebatet’s novel, some of the pages of which carried a Tolstoyan grandeur, and that he now saw that there was much in it that amounted to ‘sentimental kitsch’.⁵⁰ But his praise for Dostoevsky in the 1963 radio interview and his assertion that the *nouveau roman*, then much in vogue in France, represented a thin achievement by comparison was enough for Rebatet,

⁴⁷ *Errata*, p. 138.

⁴⁸ *Errata*, p. 139.

⁴⁹ George Steiner, 8 June 2006 conference at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

⁵⁰ Steiner, ‘Une voix qui surgit de l’ombre’, in *Steiner*, p. 100.

who was deeply hostile to contemporary French culture, to be intrigued. Following on from the radio broadcast, he rushed to get a copy of *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, a work which he nevertheless found disappointing in ways. Yet Steiner's study confirmed Rebatet in his identification with Dostoevsky as 'l'ennemi du "progressisme"' [the enemy of 'progressivism'].⁵¹ At the end of January 1964, he wrote in his diary that he had received from a contact in England a copy of an article Steiner had written for *The Sunday Times* of 1 December 1963. In it, Steiner restated the view he had put forward in the French radio interview a few months earlier that Rebatet's *Les Deux Étendards* was one of two novels (the other was Louis Guilloux's *Le Sang noir*) that made up 'the most vital French fiction of the last decades'.⁵²

An exchange of letters between Rebatet and Steiner followed. Writing to Steiner in January 1964, care of *The Sunday Times*, Rebatet made clear his anti-Semitic, Collaborationist stance in 1940 and how he had 'dans la violence de ces batailles [...] écrit beaucoup de choses outrées, cruelles, que je ne signerais plus aujourd'hui' [in the violence of those battles (...) written excessive and cruel things which I would no longer put my name to today].⁵³ Steiner's stinging reply, written in French, began with the statement that he was Jewish and that, if there were errors of spelling and syntax in his letter, it was because he had been forced to flee France in 1940 'avant que les tueurs de la Gestapo ou de la milice, dont vous étiez, ne m'eussent tué, moi et les miens' [before the killers of the Gestapo or the collaborationist militia, of which you were a part, might kill me and my family]. He went on to say that he was at pains to point out to his addressee that what 'haunted' him was the failure of culture: 'Si toute notre culture ne fut aucun obstacle à l'inhumain, à quoi bon l'immense labeur de la pensée, de la création artistique?' [If the whole of our culture could offer no resistance to the inhuman, what was the purpose of the immense labour of thought and artistic creation?].⁵⁴

The frank exchange with Rebatet served as a marker of Steiner's resoluteness of purpose but also laid bare his openness and vulnerability. He confessed to Rebatet that, having praised his work in the *Sunday Times* article, he realised he now risked hearing directly from him and being drawn into correspondence. How, Steiner protested, could dialogue be possible between them, before adding: 'Mais aussi, comment peut-il y avoir silence? Je ne sais' [But how, too, can there be silence? I do not know].⁵⁵

Steiner went to visit Rebatet at his home in Paris in March 1964. Forty years later in the *Cahiers de l'Herne* volume dedicated to him, he summed up his motivation thus: 'J'ai voulu comprendre' [I wanted to understand]. At the same time, he referred to the

⁵¹ Rebatet, "Une rencontre", in *Steiner*, pp. 101–8 (p. 101).

⁵² Cited by Rebatet, "Une rencontre", p. 103.

⁵³ Rebatet's letter of 20 January 1964, cited in Rebatet, "Une rencontre", pp. 103–4.

⁵⁴ Steiner's letter of 26 January 1964 from Cambridge, cited in Rebatet, "Une rencontre", p. 104.

⁵⁵ Steiner, cited in Rebatet, "Une rencontre", p. 105.

memory of that encounter as a source of anxiety. He reflected that Rebatet's account of their meeting as a cordial affair was wide of the mark. Yet Steiner used his brief recounting of the meeting to make the point that, as on so many occasions in his life and career, he had been confronted in the Rebatet encounter with the paradox that 'l'inhumain' [the inhuman] and 'la barbarie' [barbarity] can generate works of value – in Rebatet's case, his novel *Les Deux Étendards*.⁵⁶ Such paradox is perhaps the closest Steiner came to answering Hölderlin's question: what good are writers in destitute times? Despite it all, they bring us meaning and beauty.

Legacy

What is Steiner's own legacy as a bringer of meaning? His work endures as testament to the uses and abuses of culture in a post-modern, post-Holocaust world: his defence of 'difficulty', his 'nostalgia for the absolute' – to cite just two of his further book titles – place him firmly in the modernist tradition of viewing art as existential urgency. Increasingly, however, it feels like this tradition is a thing of the past, largely because it has been superseded by the digital age of instant gratification. By his own admission, Steiner never seriously engaged with the cinema, let alone with the Internet; his was a culture of the book if ever there were one. At the disciplinary level, too, his preoccupations were those of another century, of a period in which the canon of Western culture was largely uncontested.

In this as in many other ways, Steiner most closely recalls that great generation of European comparatists – Erich Auerbach, Ernst Robert Curtius, Leo Spitzer, René Wellek – who did so much to establish the discipline of comparative literature. In an era in which World Literature has emerged as the dominant methodology, their almost exclusively European focus now feels dated. Defiant and indefatigable, even in his lifetime Steiner was akin to the proverbial soldier on an island, still fighting the Franco-German war thirty years after it had ended. Europe has been so thoroughly 'provincialized', to use Dipesh Chakrabarty's term, that it too now risks becoming an archive of Eden. Paradise Lost – 'that squandered utopia', to cite *In Bluebeard's Castle*⁵⁷ – could be the title of Steiner's collected works. Writing in *Le Monde* (3 February 2020), Nicolas Weill, while placing Steiner alongside Auerbach, Spitzer, Starobinski, and Roland Barthes, considered the paradox whereby, in an age of globalisation, the death of a polyglot author who saw himself as a nomad should awaken nostalgia for an intellectual tradition that Steiner represented and that was disappearing.

⁵⁶Steiner, 'Une voix qui surgit de l'ombre', p. 100.

⁵⁷Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, pp. 13–14.

For these same reasons, however, Steiner will remain as a tutelary figure, as much symbol as savant. For all that he could come across, like Elias Canetti's Peter Kien, as a 'head without world',⁵⁸ it is as the embodiment of comparative literature – of its aesthetic challenge and ethical promise – that he will endure. Like most cultural critics, at heart Steiner was a moralist, forever surprising, to adapt Larkin's phrase, a hunger in himself to be more serious. 'I never considered myself chiefly as a literary critic', Steiner once observed, 'but rather as a critic of culture in general. I have always thought that literary criticism is linked to broader cultural issues and spiritual viewpoints.'⁵⁹ Steiner matters because culture matters, because he came to personify the sense that the life of the mind – pretentious and portentous though it may sometimes be – acknowledges no borders. To be a great 'European', as Steiner undoubtedly was, is not just to speak the major tongues; it is to see through these tongues to the common history that binds them. What distinguishes humans from animals, Johann Gottfried Herder suggested in his essay *On the Origin of Language* (1772), is not so much their capacity for language as their capacity for arriving at general reflection (*Besonnenheit*) through language. Few thinkers of the post-war era can be said to have pursued this reflection with as much range and rigour as George Steiner.

George Steiner was married for over sixty years to the distinguished historian Zara Steiner, who was a strong intellectual personality in her own right. They met in London in the 1950s when she (then Zara Shakow) was carrying out research as part of her PhD at Harvard and he was working for *The Economist*. Elected a Fellow of New Hall Cambridge in 1968, Zara Steiner was an authority on international relations in Europe in the inter-war years and the author of two major volumes in the Oxford History of Modern Europe: *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919–1933* and *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939*. She became a Fellow of the British Academy in 2007. They had two children. Their son David is Professor of Education at Johns Hopkins and is the executive director of that university's Institute for Educational Policy. Their daughter, Deborah Steiner, whom Steiner fondly described in *Errata* as 'an exact and illuminating philologist', is the John Jay Professor of Greek and Latin at Columbia University. Zara Steiner's death came just ten days after that of her husband.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ See Elias Canetti, *Die Blendung* (1935), translated into English as *Auto-da-Fé* (1946).

⁵⁹ Quoted in Mark Krupnick, 'George Steiner's Literary Journalism: "The Heart of the Maze"', *New England Review*, 15:2 (Spring 1993), pp. 157–67 (p. 157).

⁶⁰ David Reynolds, 'Zara Steiner, 1928–2020', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, XIX, 467–83.

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