Notes and Documents

The Three Cities of George Steiner

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> Conceivably, it is no longer legitimate for any one individual to publish on ancient Greek literature and on chess, on philosophy and the Russian novel, on linguistics and aesthetics; perhaps it is no longer advisable to hold university chairs while writing fiction and contributing more than 150 review-essays to the *New Yorker*, where, in late 1966, I was asked to help fill the gap left by Edmund Wilson. Even where something of genius is in play, as in a Koestler, the risks are steep. To smaller gifts, they may be damning. As the close comes nearer, I know that my crowded solitude, that the absence of any school or movement originating in my work, and that the sums of its imperfections are, in considerable measure, of my own doing.
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> George Steiner, *Errata: A Memoir* (155)

> Any reading engages the history and tenets of language. Comparative Literature, while alert to the contributions of formal and abstract linguistics, is immersed in, delights in, the prodigal diversity of natural languages. Comparative Literature listens and reads after Babel.
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> George Steiner, "What Is Comparative Literature?" (*No Passion Spent* 150)

It would be tempting to say that the death of George Steiner in February 2020 marked the end of an era. Without a doubt, that impulse should be resisted, although as I think we will see, it is difficult to resist it entirely. I would certainly agree with his own damning self-assessment, that he did not found a school as such, and I even agree

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that the failure of such a school to emerge does have to do with his own excesses, in both aspiration and rhetoric. But, clearly, his spirit lives on in figures such as Elif Batuman, who is every bit as important for many young literary types as Steiner was for the generation that came of intellectual age in the 1970s. However, saying a little bit about "his spirit" can illuminate some key aspects of our present literary age, its heritage, and the important revisions to that heritage which figures such as Batuman are making. When I say "his spirit," I do not mean anything particularly spiritual or religious—although I will have case to discuss Steiner's relationship to religion—but rather in the sense of something like "the spirit of SanFran." With that in mind, I would like to propose a much lankier formulation to describe Steiner; he embodied "the spirit of Chicago/Cambridge/Geneva." These three places formed him, and their influence is strongly visible throughout his incredibly diverse body of work. It is worth taking each place in its turn.

Chicago

Steiner's early life unfolded in the Paris of his birth in 1929 and the New York of his adolescence—his family, having already left Vienna, moved there when he was 11. All of these polyglot metropoles clearly influenced the seriousness with which he took language, and just as importantly, the ease with which he mixed them. His mother tongue of German was learned in the family home in the City of Light; he completed his *lycée* diploma in the heart of Manhattan. That diploma is what led him away from the east coast establishment and towards an educational environment that was at once more open-minded and more rigorous. Steiner wrote in his 1997 memoir *Errata* that "[a] brief visit to Yale during 'orientation week' made it plain to me that Jews there were consigned to a ghetto of pinched politeness" (40). The Midwest beckoned. He went on in *Errata* to describe the University of Chicago of the late 1940s as follows:

> Scornful of the childish waste and banalities clogging American collegiate syllabi, Robert Maynard Hutchins allowed applicants to sit examinations in almost every undergraduate discipline. If they scored high enough, they were dispensed from taking the regular courses. This could, exceptionally, melt down the requisites for a degree to one year. My performance in the sciences and sociology (even the word was new to me) was lamentable. Coming out of the mandarinate of a French education with emphasis on Greek and Latin, I would, at Chicago, have four demanding terms ahead of me, taught by a number of the most eminent physicists, chemists, biologists and cultural anthropologists in the west. (41)

This mixture of the cutting edge of science and a classical formation would define the rest of Steiner's career. In a book-length 2014 interview, Laure Adler asked him about his first academic post, when Robert Oppenheimer invited him to be the first humanist at Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study. She wondered of those years,

"Ont-ils été décisifs pour la suite de votre vie intellectuelle?" Steiner responded, "Profondément. D'abord parce que j'ai commencé ma vie parmi les très grands scientifiques. Nous sommes, je crois, dans le siècle de la très grande science, y compris du point de vue esthétique et philosophique" (23). We can leave aside the slightly slippery meaning of the French word "science" or "scientifique," which so easily takes in what Anglophones refer to as "the humanities," generally known as "les sciences humaines" in French. Steiner was clearly speaking to the ways in which advances in technology, enabled by greater knowledge of the physical and life sciences—that is to say, the types of researchers who were in place at the Institute for Advanced Study—have transformed post-WWII global culture. That "scientific" spirit, defined by rigour, attention to detail, and openness to surprise, was as visible in his linguistically-inflected work as in his religiously-inflected analyses. In *Real Presences*, published by the University of Chicago Press in 1989, Steiner harshly criticized what he saw as the rise of theory. He wrote there that he "would define the claim to theory in the humanities as impatience systematized [….] It exalts the myths of theory above the facts of creation. What needs to be seen clearly are the historical and psychological roots of this challenge. Again, the final stakes are theological" (87). This call to facts, history, and psychology was, for Steiner, inseparable from the Jewish intellectual tradition with which he identified so strongly, and that tradition's ancient struggle to reconcile these concrete, undeniable aspects of existence with the eternal and the divine, which is close to what Steiner means by "real."

That "spirit of Chicago," that desire to bring the sciences and the humanities together, is mostly clearly visible in Steiner's work that drew upon linguistics. A 1970s encounter with Noam Chomsky was, it seems, was crucial. The two published an originally private correspondence in the letters pages of the *New York Review of Books* on 23 March 1976, wherein Steiner queried Chomsky's essay "The Responsibility of Intellectuals," wondering what he was going to do next: resign from MIT? Go into exile? It was a friendly exchange, and two years later, Steiner published, in the pages of the *New Yorker*—at which he was settling into a gig as lead book critic that would last until 1997—an essay called "Tongues of Men." This was also mostly based on correspondence with Chomsky, this time much expanded and on the matter of Chomsky's linguistics rather than his politics. The essay is tremendous fun to read, not only because it is a lucid distilling of some of very dense scientific formulations, but also because Steiner is not at all shy about how his status as a non-professional in matters of linguistics eventually starts to try Chomsky's patience. Late in the essay, Steiner turns to a quasi-theological view of history, writing, "In short, key features of the Chomskian language revolution appear to go against the grain of the linguistic tradition situation in which the human race actually finds itself and in which it has existed so far as history and conjecture can reach back." This sentence is concluded with footnote number nine, which opens by saying that "Chomsky qualifies my remarks at this stage as 'irresponsible'" and goes on to say that "We disagree —sharply, it would appear—over the amount and quality of 'evidence' forthcoming

[….] I suspect that Chomsky would regard as merely 'of the surface' questions which seem to be primary and ontological. This is precisely the starting point for a work towards a theory of translation" (*Extraterritorial* 124-25). Indeed, the positive tone of the *New Yorker* article hid Steiner's more fundamental disagreements. Writing in in *Extraterritorial*'s foreword, he acknowledged Chomsky's preeminence as well as the elegance of his formulations, going on to say, "I am neither competent nor inclined to question their technical value and coherence." But Steiner also wrote there that his "differences with Chomskian linguistics […] are of a more fundamental kind […]. It is the thinness, the determinism of the generative transformational case—particularly in its current dogmatic vein—that I find disturbing" (ix).

That theory of translation, along with a more elaborated set of disagreements about the philosophical shortcomings of language science, came just a few years later, in his 1975 book *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. As the title indicates, the theological implications of the problem are front and centre: in addition to the Babel narrative, he asked, "Had there not been a partial redemption at Pentecost, when the gift of tongues descended on the Apostles?" (61).[1] This mention of Pentecost came only three pages after he wonders about why contemporary linguists have been so uninterested in what he calls "this destructive prodigality," the degree to which linguistic diversity has hampered efforts and building cultural solidarity, especially in societies ravaged by colonialism: "Linguistically atomized, large areas of Africa, India and South America have never gathered their economic energies either against foreign predators or economic stagnation" (58). For Steiner, this was a major question, and he was not at all satisfied with the way that linguistic science has heretofore approached it:

> Where an answer is given at all, it is put in casually evolutionary terms: there are many different tongues because, over long stretches of time, societies and cultures split apart and, through accretion of particular experience, evolved their own local speech habits. The facile nature of such an explanation is worrying: it fails to engage precisely with those central philosophical and logical dilemmas which spring from the admitted uniformities of human mental structures and from the economically and historically negative, often drastically damaging, role of linguistic isolation. (58-59)

Audible throughout this passage, and throughout *After Babel*, was the rigour he acquired as an undergraduate who had tested out of everything except science and who was then taught those subjects by some of the world's leading lights: too much facile evolutionism, not enough brain science or logic. Steiner's overall assessment of his American *alma mater* was also discernible: "The University of Chicago, during the late 1940s and the 1950s, may have come as close as any to housing the dynamic uncertainties, he collisions of purpose and *esprit* which characterise the notion, crazily arrogant and festive, of *universitas*. A special glow lay in that raw air" (*Errata* 43).

Cambridge

Steiner certainly had an uneasy relationship with the University of Cambridge, but it was no less important for being uneasy. The place was, to put it in a Steinerian way, difficult. In 1961, he was one of the first fellows appointed to the just-founded Churchill College; eight years later, they appointed him Extraordinary Fellow after he had failed to secure a regular lectureship. As Eric Homberger wrote in his *Guardian* obituary:

> He felt that Cambridge University had behaved abominably in not appointing him to a lectureship [….] Nothing revealed the disagreeable inner life of "Cambridge English" more clearly than the attitude so often expressed, more in private than in public, towards Steiner. He found people in other disciplines, and not his ostensible colleagues in the English faculty, more congenial company during these years.

The matter of "other disciplines" at Churchill College is important. Like Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study, the college was more inclined towards the sciences; its present-day website says that "[o]ur foundation specifies a focus in mathematics, science and technology, with 70% of our students studying subjects in these fields." For all the hostility that he experienced from fellow literary scholars put off by what seemed like superhuman range, and which therefore *must* be little more than bluff, it is important to remark how Steiner stayed connected to Cambridge for the rest of his life, dying in in the city 59 years after he had arrived there.

Indeed, despite the hostility that Homberger sensed on the part of the faculty, Steiner spoke quite well of the place; he clearly felt at home with some of its most fundamental assumptions. In another book-length interview in French, with the Iranian-Canadian writer Ramin Jahanbegloo, Steiner put it thus:

> Je n'ai pas eu de regret autre en quittant l'Amérique que celui de n'avoir jamais pu comprendre ce pays. J'étais en revanche très heureux d'aller à Cambridge. À l'époque il n'y avait rien, sinon des trous dans le gazon. J'ai débuté à Cambridge en 1962, en tant que Directeur d'étude en littérature et ce furent les meilleures années de ma vie. Le système de Cambridge est bien meilleur que celui d'Oxford, où l'on doit enseigner dans une université dès que l'on reçoit le titre de *fellow* d'un collège. À Cambridge, on a le choix : on peut être *fellow* sans devoir enseigner ; c'est la faculté elle-même qui distingue les *fellows*. Bien que je sois la victime de ce système, je le juge excellent. (60)

Perhaps this sense of being a victim of the system derived from his being denied a regular post. But this system that he identities as typically Cambridge, where it is *research* that is ultimately sovereign, did indeed serve him well. Steiner was by all accounts a spellbinding lecturer and left in his wake countless former students who went on to become key figures in British literary studies, but he clearly has no truck with the notion that teaching is somehow primary or even mandatory. It puts me in mind of a similar assessment from another giant of literary criticism who was also, by all reports, an excellent teacher. In his 1988 book *On Education*, Northrop Frye wondered about how "a college tells prospective freshmen that their teaching staff

directly engages students in the existential problems that will confront them in society, and we have to decide how much of that means 'our staff don't amount to much as scholars, but some of them are quite decent people to talk to'" (194). Steiner probably did not spend much time talking about "the existential problems that will confront [students] in society," but rather with lasting works of literature (and philosophy and music) which lent themselves to the kind of untangling and interpretation that could only be performed by someone whose experience and scholarship was as wide-ranging as his were.

Much has been made of Steiner's anti-Zionism, and it might seem that he was sceptical of the state of Israel because he was cosmopolitan to the core, and therefore resisted any notion that the Jewish experience could be tied down to something as dreary and limiting as a nation-state. There is certainly something to this, since he told Laure Adler in *Un long samedi*, "Je sais qu'Israël est un miracle indispensable" (31), but also, "Je ne peux pas l'accepter, parce que je crois que le Juif a une tâche: celle d'être un pèlerin des invitations" (32). He summarized by saying that "je suis, au fond, antisioniste [….] Pendant plusieurs milliers d'années, à partir d'un peu près de la chute du Grande Temple à Jérusalem, les Juifs n'avaient pas la puissance de maltraiter, de torturer, d'exproprier qui se soit ce monde. C'est pour moi la plus grande aristocratie qui soit" (34). He was echoing a sense that he had developed across several decades, that nationalism is, in essence, a dark force, and so it was wrong for Jewish people to embrace it so forcefully. This sounded blustery and denunciatory, but his position also came with a very intense dose of scepticism. This discussion with Adler was really a summary of what he had said almost twenty years earlier in *Errata*:

> As I have said, Israel, like all other nations, has to torture to survive. But is even survival a justification? Can Judaism and the moral aim of its calling recover? What I now know is only this: only those prepared to live in Israel, under the immediacies of danger and in the places of hatred, have the full right to pose this question, to address their anguish to it. It has been too easy, possibly too self-flattering, to be the "idiot-questioner" (Blake) from outside. Here, as well, I have flinched. (157)

Here we gain a glimpse of a different side of the "spirit of Cambridge," one that is not so closely connected to Steiner's experience of the University of Chicago being repeated at Churchill College. Rather, passages like these give a sense of just how English Steiner actually became. In these Brexit-inflected days, it is easy to flinch at the idea of a figure as fully and self-consciously European as George Steiner as becoming English. But this scepticism towards theoretical or moralistic pronouncements, either in favour of or against the State of Israel, are his attempt, in the words of Blake's *Milton:*

> To cast off the idiot questioner; who is always questioning
> But never capable of answering; who sits with a sly grin
> Silent plotting when to question, like a thief in a cave;
> Who publishes doubt and calls it knowledge; whose science is despair. (170)

Steiner's Englishness became visible not just through his fondness for Blake, or more precisely the degree to which he seemed to identify with Blake's revolutionary defence of the transcendent and, in the case of this specific poetic reference, his deploring of those who "publish doubt and call it knowledge," which would be a fair description of how he saw literary theorists. Rather, we can see Steiner's Englishness through his embrace of something close to the Common Law, or what is more commonly described as the English tendency to muddle along. That tendency derives quite directly from that legal tradition, one that emphasizes precedent and jurisprudence over slavish adherence to written laws, one that privileges the facts of experience over the false purity of systems. It is precisely this desire to "muddle along" that made Steiner hostile to broad theoretical pronouncements that seemed to ignore the textures and histories of *actual works of literature*, and along with it the surprises that understanding those histories would lead to, the revisions of *idées réçues* that real feeling for those textures would mandate. It is just that openness to paradox, to contradiction, and to doubt that would lead him to both reject the State of Israel and to call it, repeatedly and in at least two languages, "un miracle indispensable" (*Un long samedi* 31) or "an *indispensable miracle*" (*Errata* 157; emphasis in original). It is this tentative quality that made Steiner a most English kind of anti-Zionist, this insistence on grounding understanding in a full engagement with "the facts of creation" that made his criticism a true artefact of the city of Cambridge.

Geneva

Although it may seem unbelievable given his renown, Steiner did not secure a regular, permanent professorship until 1974, when at the age of 45 he was appointed Professor of Comparative Literature at the Université de Genève. He maintained a connection to Cambridge in those years, and to the linguistic-theological nexus that is so embodied by *After Babel*, the first book he published from that perch in Geneva. But if Chicago symbolizes the heights of "l'esprit scientifique" and Cambridge the sovereignty of research, then Geneva holds a similar symbolic weight in terms of internationalism. Although it is part of the famously insular nation of Switzerland, to which it was a relative latecomer, Geneva is the global city *par excellence*, home of the headquarters of Médecins sans frontières and the International Red Cross, and, of course, of the second-largest office of the United Nations. Considering the importance of the "spirit of Geneva" reminds us just how curious and wide-ranging an internationalist Steiner was, albeit mostly in a European context. However odd from a strictly professional-development standpoint, then, there is something almost inevitable about Steiner finding his first permanent perch in a city that, as part of a multilingual federation that is resolutely not part of the European Union, was also at the heart of Europe.

The passion for European culture is a key part of the Steiner legacy, and is some-

thing that infused all of his most important work. This was, however, very far from being a simplistic cultural chauvinism. It was precisely diversity and difference—although most certainly not *différance*!—that Steiner saw as the core of the European experience, and it was the tensions that such difference produced that were, for him, most significant in literary history. In a short book (more of a long essay) from 2004 called *The Idea of Europe*, written at the behest of the Nexus Institute in Amsterdam, he explained this difference-led vision of Europe:

> The genius of Europe is what William Blake would have called the "holiness of the minute particular." It is that of linguistic, cultural, social diversity, of a prodigal mosaic which often makes a trivial distance, twenty kilometres apart, a division between worlds. In contrast to the awesome monotony which extends from western New Jersey to the mountains of California, in contrast to that lust for sameness which is both the strength and vacancy of so much of American existence, the splintered, often absurdly divisive map of the European spirit and its inheritance, has been inexhaustibly fertile. (59)

Steiner's disdain for what he saw as the homogeneity of American culture was most explicit in his controversial 1980 essay "The Archives of Eden," collected in his 1996 book *No Passion Spent*, and I would certainly expect contemporary scholars of American literature to flinch at such characterizations. But the point about European culture stands regardless, as does my point about Steiner's *Weltanschauung* flowing from a passion for and serious engagement with cultural diversity that would put most contemporary advocates of multiculturalism to shame. Having made that claim, I will not unduly obscure some of the more chauvinistic elements of his sensibility. These were most recently and explicitly on display in *Un long samedi* when Adler asked him, "Vous êtes très dur envers l'islam, pourquoi?" and he replied "D'abord parce que la menace en ce moment se fait de plus en plus cruelle" and claimed that one particular problem was "l'abandon de toute science depuis le XVe siècle" (57). It is worth pointing out that Steiner could be equally chauvinistic in a specifically European context, stating in that same interview, "En Italie, pays que j'adore, il n'y a entre Milan et Bari, dans le sud, que des kiosques; pas de libraire sérieuse. En Italie, on ne lit pas. On lit très peu dans l'Espagne ou le Portugal ruraux. Là où le catholicisme a régné, la lecture n'a jamais été bienvenue" (98). The dig at Catholicism was hardly new; in a 2005 essay originally published in France's venerable left-Catholic review *Esprit*, he wrote of *la lecture* that although it is "résolument centrale dans le protestantisme (en dépit de quelques inquiétudes occasionnellement soulevées par Luther), elle demeure toujours extérieure à la manière propre de percevoir du catholicisme" (*Le silence des livres* 21-22). This is all to say that Steiner was always possessed of a passionate desire to defend European and European-inflected literary culture wherever it might flourish, as can be seen in his 1970 tribute to Jorge Luis Borges: "There is a sense in which the director of the Biblioteca Nacional of Argentina is now the most original of Anglo-American writers" (*At the New Yorker* 165-66). This did lead him, especially in his later years, towards a clearly polemical but nevertheless sometimes blinding disdain for cultural formations that departed from that European and

European-inflected literary culture. In fairness, he very easily extended that disdain to parts of Europe as well.

This Europhilic defense of difference, this love for a "linguistic, cultural, social diversity, of a prodigal mosaic," led directly into the concerns of this journal and the field it represents. Thus it is no wonder that I find this "spirit of Geneva" most clearly expressed in the lecture that he gave to inaugurate his term as Oxford's Lord Weidenfeld Visiting Professor of European Comparative Literature. With the simple title "What Is Comparative Literature?" Steiner's 1994 paper sought to explain the discipline in a way that foregrounded its roots in the details of specific cultures and texts but also its universalist, and we might today say globalist, aspirations. Returning again to Borges by way of emphasizing Comparative Literature's tradition of centralizing the importance of language, he wrote:

> The poet's language takes us home to that which we did not know. It is in this precise psychological and epistemological sense that the "Library at Babel" (Borges) and, above all, its dictionaries, do contain the totality of literatures past, present at to come. The semantic process is one of differentiation. To read is to compare. (*No Passion Spent* 144)

Like his Europhilia, this should not be taken as simple disciplinary chauvinism even if, like Steiner's love of European literary culture, his defense of a certain idea of Comparative Literature was clearly in some ways about defending its special calling. What was really going on *chez Steiner*, I think, was a defence of a critical practice which remained open to surprise, "to that which we did not know," a surprise that is distinct to literature, and because distinct to literature based in the experience of language. Steiner's defence of Comparative Literature was really a defence of literature in its most primal form: the use of *language* in ways that transform a reader's sense of the world. In this way he drew attention to that long-forgotten grandchild of World Literature, which is "General Literature": an approach to the literary that is general inasmuch as it aspires to the universal, rather than only the local or national, which are, of course, *also* contained in its aspirations. We can hear in Steiner's definition of the task of Comparative Literature René Wellek's sense that "[t]he artificial demarcation between 'comparative' and 'general' literature should be abandoned." Wellek went on to state in that seminal 1959 essay "The Crisis of Comparative Literature," "Personally I wish we could simply speak of the study of literature or of literary scholarship and that there were, as Albert Thibaudet proposed, professors of literature just as there are professors of philosophy and of history and not professors of the history of English philosophy" (290). Steiner was just this kind of professor of literature, and this is precisely the kind of disciplinary arrangement that he seemed to be advocating throughout his career. It is no wonder that he had a somewhat easier time in a European university context, where professors of literature are much more common than in the Anglophone world in which "English professor," along with all of its attendant disciplinary expectations, is more the default. Steiner found that out very early in his academic career, and spent the rest of his years pushing hard against

those conventions.

Eras

I opened this discussion of Steiner's work by offering the example of Elif Batuman as a younger figure with a comparable profile: cosmopolitan, multilingual, passionate about Russian literature—and unfortunately I have not had space to discuss Steiner keystones such as *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky: An Essay in Contrast* from 1960—interested in broader cultural problems, and at home in the pages of the *New Yorker*, where she is, as Steiner once was, a staff writer. But it is difficult to imagine Batuman's writing ever occupying a kind of easy centrality among a wide readership with serious interests in literature and culture in the way that Steiner did. Those who know Batuman's work find it incomparably important; I am not sure how many really know her work, though. Perhaps this is because Batuman is still fairly young: 42 as I write this. But I am not convinced that this tells the whole story. When Martin Amis reviewed Steiner's book on chess, which I also regret I have not had space to engage in this discussion, he wrote that "one of the most attractive things about Steiner's new book is how refreshingly unSteineresque it is. There's not one detailed comparison between a middle game and Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge*. Page after page goes by without any reference to Auschwitz" (342). When Amis wrote that for the *New Statesman*, Steiner was 44. It is difficult for me to imagine a comparably knowing joke being made in a general-readership weekly—not a specifically literary magazine like the *Literary Review of Canada* or the *London Review of Books* or *n+1*—about a literary critic at that point in his/her career. Perhaps I am not reading the right magazines. And no doubt Elif Batuman's work could be described in ways that are comparable to how I have been discussing Steiner's, as embodying something like "the spirit of New York / Moscow / Istanbul." Therefore, it is important not to be overly romantic, not to indulge in the longing that is so plangent in that Irish Gaelic phrase *ní bheidh a leitheid ann aris* [we'll not see his like again]. With all that in mind, though, I hope that this discussion has illustrated the singular quality of Steiner's thought, and its lasting value for a Comparative Literature that so badly needs to re-energize its sense of purpose and rediscover what unique contributions it has, as a field, to make to our understanding of a globalized world.

Note

1. *Acts* 2:5-8 (KJV): "And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galilæans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born?"

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