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Steiner: Proud to be cosmopolitan

edited by Giulia Crivelli

In an era dominated by the “fascism of vulgarity”, market censure and a knowledge economy, culture and cultural and philosophical thought are systematically sabotaged, according to the Jewish intellectual George Steiner.

George Steiner is one of the great intellectuals of our time. Born in Paris of Viennese parents on 23 April 1929, the date of William Shakespeare’s birth and death (Steiner mockingly says he did it on purpose), he emigrated to the U.S. in 1940 because of racial laws and became an American citizen. His Jewish origins and his own story have however led him to be practically rootless – an “extraterritorial”, to quote the title of his 1971 book of essays. He has written an incredible number of very valuable essays and studies from the 1950s to the present day (only a few of which have been translated into Italian), with themes that range from linguistics to ethics, translation theory to literature and figurative art to science. In 2001, when *Grammars of Creation* was published, the “Times Literary Supplement” wrote: “George Steiner is the most brilliant cultural journalist currently writing in English or perhaps any language”, emphasising the fact that he does not only address academics in a specific field but rather all thinking individuals who are aware of the social and political realities that

surround them – in the most ample and global sense of the term. The most recent of his works to be translated into Italian is *The Idea of Europe*, which contains the text of his lecture at the Nexus Institute in Amsterdam, a think tank set up to study and promote European culture. Steiner appears to be tormented by the survival to our days of what he calls “the nightmare of European history”: ethnic hatred, nationalist chauvinism, unchecked regionalism and the resurrection, whether dissembled or explicit, of anti-Semitism. Another recurrent theme in Steiner’s recent work, which also appears in his lecture in the Netherlands, is that of a “dumbed down” cultural standardisation deriving from globalisation which, in his view, is cancelling out the great linguistic and cultural variety that was the prime legacy of the Old Continent. One of Steiner’s toughest statements is a protest against the banality and vulgarity of cultural consumer products: “It is not political censure that kills culture: it is the despotism of the mass market and the recompenses of a commercialised fame”. According to Rob Riemen, director of the Nexus Institute, “it is possible to sum up what we have learnt from the intellectual tradition of which George Steiner forms part



Steiner reminds us that “cosmopolitan” is a Greek word meaning “world citizen”. The Jewish intellectual says it was Hitler and Stalin who gave this term its worst sense

in a single phrase: ‘the world of culture is of fundamental importance to the quality of life’’. According to Steiner, in this era of ours dominated by what he calls the “fascism of vulgarity” and market censure; in this era of the “knowledge economy”, culture and cultural and philosophical thought is sabotaged or actually made impossible far more often than we might believe. These themes also recur in his book *La barbarie de l’ignorance: the Italian edition*, published at the end of 2005 by a small but sterling Roman publishing house, Nottetempo, collects Steiner’s conversations with the French journalist and intellectual Antoine Spire in a single volume. Here are some extracts from this precious little book, which offers innumerable opportunities for thought and discussion.

You were born in 1929 and spent your early years in Paris’s 16th arrondissement. What are your memories of this time?

It was a very liberal neighbourhood – there was a lot of culture and a strong Jewish presence as well. My first steps were, in every sense, those of a privileged, protected childhood in a house full of books and music; a wonderful mother of Viennese origin, a polyglot; a father of Czech origin, from a tiny place eight kilometres from the village of Ridice, known as the setting for a Nazi reprisal during World War II. And an education full of hope and the humanism, typical of the world that united France and Central Europe.

Speaking of Central Europe: you have mentioned Vienna and Prague, your parents’ cities. You come from the Vienna of Benjamin, Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Lukacs, Freud. One might say that the legendary Vienna of cultured people was your family cocoon.

It was already a tragic Vienna. We must not forget the paradox – the matrix, if I may say so – of our modern culture, our modernism and even postmodernism, however already obscured by an increasingly ferocious anti-Semitism, particularly because of the catastrophe, from 1914 to 1918, of the stump of an empire seeking a future precisely with Germany. There were... it's very difficult to express it – physics gives us a word to define explosions, but as we know, implosions are even more powerful; they are a concentrate of strength that the restrictedness of the environment multiplies by ten. The place was too small. Everyone knew everyone else. All of a sudden Vienna, the ancient imperial capital, had become a village. But I was born in Paris and I knew of this world only through my parents. (...)

Having emigrated in 1924, your father rebuilt his life in Paris. He used to write for the “Manchester Guardian”: he came from a German-speaking world and wrote in English for an English newspaper – all of which explains the fact that you were raised trilingual.

My mother would start a sentence in one language and end it in another without realising it. She had a very fine ear; her French was a delight. In Viennese culture, French was one of the ways to access the pleasure of another civilisation. Today, with American English being nearly universal, we forget that it was French that gave access to European classical sensibilities. It was by speaking French that one became “cosmopolitan” (the term has become horrible because of Hitler, but it remains a wonderful term). It's a wonderful term in the Greek sense of the word – a citizen of the planet. There's nothing lovelier! It was Hitler and Stalin who gave this term its worst sense. It can be said that this term has recovered its value and its beauty today. Being cosmopolitan means truly being a citizen of the world. It was the ideal of the learned as well as a certain Jewish emancipation: the great historic exit from the ghetto, the movement westward and towards freedom, the ideal of the French Revolution and the great thinkers of the Enlightenment. Under excessive Anglo-American power we have, I believe, partly lost the sense of what it means to be European at this time.

It was then that you realised that a language also means new freedom. You were trilingual, therefore, and in a book titled *After Babel* (see bibliography, editor's note) you wished to recount both the necessity of this multilingualism and the way this allows one to enter the psychologies of different peoples.

It's my greatest good fortune! Every language is a window to another world; another landscape, another structure of human values. We must insist once again on this point: a certain pedagogy, mainly American, would like to tell us that “the multilingual child



“People's relation to religiosity is a very complex issue, says Steiner. “My father used to read me the Old Testament, but I suspect he was an atheist or at any rate very Voltairian”

Who is George Steiner

George Steiner is a top-level international figure in the field of criticism as a result of an exceptional and often provocative personality and the prolific series of very valuable essays and studies he has published from the 1950s to the present day on themes ranging from linguistics to ethics, translation theory to literature and the figurative arts to science.

Currently a Fellow of Churchill College in Cambridge, he has taught at several American and European universities including Princeton, Stanford, Chicago, Oxford and the University of Geneva. His cultural training and intellectual history make Steiner difficult to either classify in the panorama of western literary studies or categorize within a specific school or group.

Many of his writings reflect his particular sensitivity towards the most decisive events of the history of the modern world where, in his view, "speech has been placed in a corner; non-verbal forms of discussion have the advantage in fields where writing once reigned sovereign". He is primarily interested in the reasons and methods of communication and the importance of the act of reading and interpretation and has openly declared his profession of faith in language and opposition to suicidal doctrines such as *Deconstruction on the ruining of sense*. As Malcolm Bradbury has pointed out acutely in "The Times": "Steiner's appeal is in part due to the fact that he celebrates and is the great academic and reader for whom the infinite reinterpretation of the West's great ideas and myths are fundamental to existence – all expressed with charismatic power that makes even the difficult easy and is an invitation to rebel against low-level educational standards, intellectual simplification and false prophecies".

risks schizophrenia; he risks mental disorders". In my view this is totally absurd! Giving a child many languages means giving his personality, above all, a sense of humanity in general. Which means that there is no chauvinistic or national monopoly of a single human modality. It is essential to be able to get closer to the literature and history of another tradition! If trees have roots – and I adore trees – men have legs; this is immense progress – languages have given us legs. We can be received by other men, understand what they say and reply in our turn... I've also had the enormous good fortune of adding a language I adore, Italian, to my linguistic baggage. Today, at the end of my career, my teaching, I still have the privilege of teaching and lecturing in four languages! Each time it is a great holiday for the soul. I can't say it any other way: it's a marvellous freedom. (...)

You are Jewish and, as you yourself have said, Viennese Judaism has marked your culture and your history. We might say that yours is a rather secular Judaism.

This is a very complex issue. When one loses one's parents one thinks about them a lot to try and understand them. It's a strange phenomenon. Even the memory is an analysis, a constant interrogation. I suspect my father of having been atheist or, at the very least, very "Voltairian". I believe that, like many great Viennese ladies, my mother occasionally had conversations with the Omnipresent, but at a secular and earthly level. However, right from the beginning, history was our doctrine, so to speak. What does it mean to be Jewish? I know many Jewish stories: my father would read the Old Testament to me as a great poetic and historical document – absolutely not as doctrine. He insisted that I prepare for my Bar Mitzvah with a very great and strict rabbi in New York. For a time – and this is one of the things that saddens me the most – I went through a period of inner laziness: I should have continued to learn Hebrew. I had a gift for languages. I had thrown myself into learning Latin and Greek and perhaps because of laziness, as I mentioned, I abandoned Hebrew, but I don't remember exactly when. I will regret it to the end of my days. For my father, a ceremony of this kind meant: Who are you? And in the century of Hitler, he told me: "You belong to a club that one never leaves. On the contrary: you announce it". He had this conviction that he would transfer to complex issues such as mixed marriages – very delicate issues that tormented me when I thought of the future. He was convinced that we must have an identity. I remember having met a close French friend after the war; he had miraculously survived the camps. He told me: "One can't possibly tell how terrible the death trains (described, for example, by Duras, Semprun and others) were – and it was even worse for those who didn't know why they were on the train, who had never told their children who they were and were so totally assimilated that the disaster took them totally by surprise". They believed it was an administrative, a bureaucratic mistake: "I've nothing to do with all this!" Well, that's even more terrible. We need to know who we are; I believe this gives us at least some small inner strength.