

Doors Half-Open in Bluebeard's Castle: George Steiner and His Heretical Essays in Modern Times

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ABSTRACT

George Steiner was a French-American polymath and polyglot. Along with Umberto Eco, Steiner has been ranked among the very last European metaphysicians as well as a leading cultural critic of the 20th century. Although an erudite scholar writing extensively in four languages about the most pressing issues of late modernity, Steiner has never been very popular among the general public. While his original essays won critical acclaim, by intellectuals he has also been rebuked for his ill-judged, doom-laden and reactionary elitist visions. The following paper deals with Steiner's most thought-provoking, "heretical" texts on the nature of modern barbarism and the basic inhumanity at the heart of the humanities. The aim is to suggest possible reasons for Steiner's "persona non grata" status.

KEYWORDS

George Steiner, Holocaust, humanities, culture, post-culture, literacy, heresy

Blackmail of the Absolute

There are three types of thinkers. The first and smallest group consists of a very few gifted intellectuals, the *alphas* who are able to come up with original ideas strong enough to inspire or establish a school, teaching or a movement. In the second group one finds thinkers who do not create any original world. They rank among *beta plus plus* commentators and interpreters yet their contribution is incomparable, as they are able to bring down the ideas of genius from the ivory tower, making them intelligible to the common man. Then there are the rest: those who try but, to use Samuel Beckett's apposite phrase, "fail, fail better." Such a tripartite distinction was introduced by George Steiner, a French-born American literary critic, teacher, philosopher, essayist and novelist in his autobiographical essay *Errata: An Examined Life*. In examining his own life, Steiner keeps it on the level of the group he belongs to. Even though his authority within academia is indisputable, with scholars from around the world annually invited to London to give the George Steiner Lecture in Comparative Literature, he did not establish any school or movement. His thoughtful, erudite, masterly written "poetic-philosophical investigations" are of great significance, yet, as they reveal the true nature of modernity they are at variance with established standards, which is why Steiner's work has not reached the popularity of those who merely reiterate received popular ideas. To a certain degree they Steiner may thus be called a "heretic" for his stances against the dehumanizing effects of modernity.

When it comes to the Jewish history, especially in relation to the anti-Semitic attitudes and terror in the 20th century, several unsettling questions arise. Why the urge to annihilate the whole Jewish race? Why the final solution when the Jews could have been removed to some remote places in the East completely excluded from the rest of Western civilization as originally planned? Why the belief that as long as a single Jew stays alive, the Nazi (and Stalinist) régime will not thrive? And vice versa: why have the Jews survived? How come that they survived so many blows they

had been exposed to? Not only in the context of the Shoah, but in the context of the atrocities and pogroms in Tsarist Russia in the late 19th century, in Central and Western Europe throughout the Middle Ages (Erfurt, Prague, Toulon, Granada), or the first and second destruction of the Temple (586 B.C.E and 70 C.E.). Even more striking is contemporary popularity of *The Protocols of Elders of Zion*, an anti-Semitic hoax which has made its way into many languages. As early as 1921 this text was exposed as a fake, yet almost a century later it continues to sell millions of copies.¹

According to Steiner, any serious analysis of our present circumstances which does not consider modes of terror at the heart of civilization in the 20th century is irresponsible.² Similarly, it is irresponsible to consider the Holocaust as a result of individual pathology or a neurosis of one nation-state. In one of his numerous essays on the current state of culture, Steiner argues that “we are not dealing with some monstrous accident in modern social history.”³ Therefore, we shall not compare the Shoah to other massacres in the 20th century (e.g. Romani and Armenian genocide). There are, of course, certain parallels in technique and the idiom of hatred, but not at the level of philosophical intent. Seen from this perspective, Steiner shows that the Holocaust is to be understood as a consequence of old, deep-seated tensions stemming from the clash between instinctual and religious life, between elemental desires of the ego and moral demands prescribed to men by some deity. Ironically, when exploring a possible cause of the Holocaust Steiner draws upon Adolf Hitler’s jibe “conscience is a Jewish invention,” insinuating that throughout the history of Western civilization the Jews have always been seen as bad conscience, as “sharp-edged pebble in the shoes of mankind.”⁴

To provide evidence of this, Steiner borrows Ibsen’s phrase “claim of ideal.” In his early essays (*Language and Silence* or, above all, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*) he unfolds an assumption that the Jews were involved in three intellectual milestones in the course of Western mind. The first ideal is the Jewish invention of monotheism. The concept of the God of Israel is a unique act in the human experience. It is a pure abstraction: The God of Torah cannot be represented by an image as the divine presence is invisible, immeasurable, unfathomable, yet at the same time He is omnipresent and omnipotent. This “immeasurable Absence,” Steiner concludes,

hammers at human consciousness demanding that it transcend itself, that it reach out into a light of understanding so pure that it is itself blinding. We turn back into grossness, and what is more important, into self-reproach. Because the idea is still there, because, in Blake’s shorthand for tyranny of the revealed, light presses on the brain. [...] The doctrine of a single Deity, whom men cannot play off against other gods and thus win open spaces for their own aims, is “the most monstrous of all human errors.”⁵

1 In Japan, for instance. See David G. Goodman, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion: Aum, and Antisemitism in Japan* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005); and Stephen J. Whitfield, “The Persistence of the Protocols,” *Society* 55, no. 5 (2018): 417–421.

2 George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Re-definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 29.

3 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 36.

4 George Steiner, “Zion,” in *My Unwritten Books*, by George Steiner (New York: New Directions, 2007), 95.

5 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 38.

The second unparalleled act of moral demand related to the Jewish people is the altruistic imperative of the Gospel. A large part of Western life has been informed by the idea that the kingdom of heaven is only for the poor in spirit. In order to hope for salvation, one must be meek, merciful, pure in heart, one must hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:3–11). It is never late to turn the other cheek; bless them that curse you; do good to them who hate you. Christian ethics, as constituted in the Sermon on the Mount, is built on an utmost moral commitment which only few are able to fulfil. To suppress instinctive reactions is a step further; like a superstructure added to a ground floor, it takes more effort and energy to attain the desired objectives. Secular existence and the Christian doctrine of right living, Steiner believes, resemble two parallel ways, the convergence of which is but wishful thinking. Even in the well-ordered times of the nineteenth-century world, be it in Biedermeier Germany or Victorian England, these challenges burdened individual lives and put pressure on the subconscious. Consequently, to do away with the Jews was just to relieve or reduce the burden of expectation.⁶

The roots of the third confrontation between Judaism and Western man Steiner finds in the messianic eschatology of the nineteenth-century socialism. The socialist vision, as put forward by Marx or Trotsky, anticipates the utopian state of classless society in which competition and war will cease and human exploitation will be eradicated. However, to reach this final stage of the socialist dream the individual needs to renounce selfishness and sacrifice individual profit for the common good. Moreover, there is no limit in cost. Those who refuse to meet the demands of messianic socialism or who cast doubt upon messianic promise are considered as enemies of society and their own humanity.

In sum, what Steiner points out is that these three supreme moments which have forged Western culture – monotheism at Sinai, early Christianity, messianic socialism – are “three stages, profoundly interrelated, through which Western consciousness is forced to experience the blackmail of transcendence,” and that, consequently, “when it turned on the Jew, Christianity and European civilization turned on the incarnation – albeit an incarnation often wayward and unaware – of its own best hopes.”⁷

The Grammar of the Shoah

As compared to this interpretation of the general prejudice towards the Jews, Steiner’s endeavor to explain why, after all, the Jews have survived a surge of hatred, why they managed to slip out of the atrocious machinery of the final solution, is no less thought-provoking. The reasons are manifold and obscure, but it may be that the Jew is most at home in his or her identity. An integral part of this identity, Steiner suggests, is contempt and exile. This idea, of course, is not new; Jean-Paul Sartre in his 1944 essay on the etiology of Jew-hatred famously stated that the very essence of Jewishness exists only through what is considered Jewish by those around them.⁸ It is the anti-Semite who makes the Jews gather in a shtetl, to confirm their identity in a diaspora while following rituals

6 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 39.

7 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 40–41.

8 J.-P. Sartre, *Anti-Semitism and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

and never-ending Talmudic interpretations. Steiner draws upon Sartre's idea but turns it towards a dispute between Orthodox Judaism and Zionism over the establishment of a Jewish state in the territory of the Holy Land. He claims that once the walls of the secular state of Israel were built the Jewish identity was made bereft of its essence: "Identity, familial and commercial, is composed of shared emotions and reiterations, not of philosophic abstractions or privacy. Assured faith is a style of life."⁹ In 1975 Zionism was declared by the General Assembly of the United Nations as "a form of racism and racial discrimination,"¹⁰ a controversial resolution tempered by its revocation in 1991. Steiner never departed from perceiving the State of Israel as "a sad miracle."¹¹ By claiming that Judaism goes far beyond Israel, that by implementing Herzl's Zionist program of Israel as necessary for the very survival of Jews, Zionists adopted the modern nation state with all of its chauvinism and militant attitudes. Here Steiner touches a nerve with regard to the received mythos of the *Promised Land*: at the level of the profane Israel reinforced Jewish existence, but the costs were too high. Throughout history one finds accounts of "Jew-hunting," but not a single one of the Jews being hunters. At least since the destruction of Solomon's Temple the Jews were never in a position of persecuting other races, of assimilating other nations or colonizing other states. Are there any instances of crimes against humanity committed by the Jewish people? However, burdens and constant danger which Israeli citizens are facing on a daily basis, the permanent presence of an enemy behind the wall is, according to Steiner, "reducing Jews to the common condition of nationalist man. It has diminished that moral singularity and that aristocracy of nonviolence toward others which were the tragic glory of the Jew."¹²

Yet it was not this "betrayal" which caused a stir both among the Jewish community and gentile intellectuals. Paradoxically, the most provoking statements come from *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (1979–1981), a philosophical novella about Jewish Nazi hunters who find Adolf Hitler alive in the Amazon jungle in 1977. The novella, in 1982 also adopted for the theatre by Christopher Hampton, was a finalist for the 1983 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction – more or less due to the controversial aspects of the book rather than the aesthetic quality. Steiner's fictional Hitler is 90 years old and the search party finds him in a clearing deep in the swamps of Amazonia. They are about to escort the captive back to civilization and finally bring him to justice. Meanwhile, pressing questions arise: Who should hold the trial and under whose jurisdiction? And is it, after all, still necessary? Do we really want to open the old wounds? "Why drag the aged swine out of this stretch of hell [...] when we could be building, when we could be knitting ourselves new and forgetting? No one cares anymore."¹³ Of course, these questions are not new, but the way Steiner approaches them is stimulating, as it also aims at revealing the roots of collective amnesia.¹⁴

9 Steiner, "Zion," 97–98.

10 *United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3379*, November 10, 1975, § 6.

11 George Steiner; Laure Adler. *A Long Saturday Conversations* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 20.

12 Steiner, "Zion," 120.

13 George Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.," in *The Deeps of the Sea*, by George Steiner (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 26.

14 For example, Vichy France may be characterized not as Hitler's creation but a sociopolitical structure stemming from an agrarian, clerical, patriarchal France still not able to come to terms with the French Revolution; or the suggestion that

Members of the search party, all but one with family ties to the Holocaust, consider themselves as instruments of God's righteousness. Hence the motivation to undergo a strenuous passage through swamps with the infirm Hitler on their shoulders. However, when it starts to rain heavily it becomes nearly impossible to keep going. As they fear that Hitler might not survive until the weather turns, they decide to arrange the trial on their own, with Simeon the search party leader as a presiding judge. The biblical reference is not accidental: like the eponymous prophet of New Testament, he meets the Messiah, though this time not in the person of the young Jesus, but the Nazi Führer. For it is Hitler, who in his closing statement maintains that the Nazi régime created Israel, suggesting blasphemously that his "infamous deeds were allowed by God in order to bring His people home."¹⁵ Similarly bold and politically incorrect arguments echo in other points of the fictional plaidoyer. Hitler claims that his racism is only a parody, a pale imitation of the notion of superior race embodied in the chosen nation. He also justifies the final solution as the effective way to extirpate "blackmail of transcendence." By means of Hitler's eloquence, Steiner reproaches the anti-Hitler coalition for its hypocrisy and hesitancy to take measures against the systematic annihilation of the Jews in Europe. "When I turned on the Jew," Hitler states vigorously,

no one came to his rescue. No one. France, England, Russia, even Jew-ridden America did nothing. They were glad that the exterminator had come. Oh, they did not say so openly, I allow you that. But secretly they rejoiced. We had to find, to burn out the virus of utopia before the whole of our western civilization sickened. To return to man as he is, selfish, greedy, shortsighted, but warm and housed, so marvelously housed, in his own stench. "We were chosen to be conscience of man," said the Jew. And I answered him, yes, I, gentleman, who now stand before you: "You are not man's conscience, Jew. You are only his bad conscience. And we shall vomit you so we may live and have peace." A final solution. How could there be any other?¹⁶

Last but not least, Steiner's Hitler demurs to the charges of the gravest crimes against humanity by claiming that he was only a "dabbler" as compared to Belgian atrocities in the Congo Free State or to Stalin and those thirty million men who had been slaughtered by him and his tortures. The trial ends with an ambiguous exclamation by Teku, a local Indian tracker who serves as an independent witness. Teku leaps up and cries out "Proven." Paradoxically, Teku does not understand the words, merely guessing meaning from the context. Is it Hitler's culpability for genocide that has been proven or his innocence by analogy? As further explanation is being drowned in the noise of helicopters hovering above the clearing, there is no clear answer. "Teku" may be understood as an acronym for a Hebrew Talmudic phrase "the messiah will answer questions and problems,"¹⁷ which suggests God as the only relevant judge in this matter. On the other hand, in the view of Steiner's oeuvre, it may also be interpreted as a reference to his life-long theme of the corruption of language, to the notion that language – in classical literacy once considered as a means of adequate approximation

Fascism envisioned and promoted the unity of Teutonic-Latin genius, while reducing the influence of the materialist barbarism of the United States and the Soviet Union. See Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.," 26, 27.

15 Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.," 147.

16 Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.," 145.

17 *Tishbi yetzaretz kushyot ve'abayot*. See Norman Finkelstein, "Judaism and the Rhetoric of Authority: George Steiner's Textual Homeland," in *The Ritual of New Creation: Jewish Tradition and Contemporary Literature*, ed. Norman Finkelstein (New York: SUNY Press, 1992), 116.

to the truth – is corruptible and easily misused to justify lies of totalitarian regimes. Steiner's Hitler is a misuser of language *par excellence*.¹⁸

It comes as no surprise that the novel stirred up controversy. The critical reception, however, devotes attention primarily to the issue of justification for Hitler. Most of the rebukes finally echo the same point: Why is there no reply? Why have you allowed Hitler the final word, or, in fact, the first and only word? In one of his replies to the harsh criticism, Steiner claims that “absence of conclusive answer constitutes the impact and freedom of a literary text”¹⁹ and that, consequently, the only possible way to avoid simplifying conclusions in such a complicated issue is to leave the decision up to a reader/audience. Noticeably fewer reviews aimed at the factual aspects of Steiner's argumentation. British playwright Arnold Wesker, for example, questions the speculative assumption that the Jews invented conscience. Similarly, Martin Gilbert, a prominent British Jewish historian, challenges the stereotypical exploitation of Jewish passivity and helplessness, accusing Steiner of a lack of knowledge regarding this vexed issue. Gilbert also disapproves of the belief that Jewish chosenness is to be understood as an impetus for privileges, claiming that the Jews as a people were chosen in order to obey God's command, not to dominate over other peoples and races. Lastly, Gilbert is set against the assertion that the statehood of Israel was profoundly rooted in the Nazi atrocities against the Jews. Jewish immigration, he argues, had been occurring since the end of the 19th century and thus cannot be attributed to the Holocaust.²⁰

The arguments presented by Gilbert are correct and historically accurate, yet they are short of deeper, metaphysical insight. Steiner's approach to the Holocaust is unique and noteworthy, as he perceives Jew-hatred as a metaphysical, religious problem. There are, of course, remarkable attempts to get to the heart of the matter. Zygmunt Bauman and his persuasive claim that the deep psychic sources of Holocaust madness lie in the very nature of modernity, or Hannah Arendt and her famous yet unpopular report on the banality of evil.²¹ But in asking why even during the last stages of a lost world war Hitler chose to pursue the final solution rather than to use manpower to turn the defeat, why the total annihilation of the Jewish race was more important than the survival of Reich, Hitler's own life included, Steiner remains alone. To brand his arguments as “deceptive attraction” and “false historical charges against a whole people” (Gilbert), or to accuse his theories of a misleading “reliance on literary works as a substitute for history,”²² not to mention Gershom Scholem's admonition of Steiner for “trying to live outside of history, while we in Israel are living

18 For a detailed analysis of the diminution of language see Steiner's essay “The Retreat from the Word,” in *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, by George Steiner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998) and chapter two from George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 51–134.

19 George Steiner, “Who Do You Think You Are Kidding, Dr. Gilbert?” *The Times*, March 11, 1982.

20 Martin Gilbert, “What do you think you are kidding, Mr. Hitler?” *The Times*, March 6, 1982. For a comprehensive survey of reviews of *Portage* see Nick White, “The Ventriloquial Paradox: George Steiner's ‘The Portage to San Cristobel of A. H.’” *New Theatre Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (2002): 66–90.

21 See for Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and The Holocaust* (Ithaca, NY : Cornell University Press, 1989); Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006).

22 Roger W. Smith, “George Steiner and the War Against the Jews: A Study in Misrepresentation,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* 6, no. 2 (2011), accessed March 29, 2021, <<https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/gsp/vol6/iss2/8>>.

responsibly, inside of history,”²³ is legitimate. Yet these counters to Steiner a priori omit what seems to be the most stimulating and valuable part of his investigations – an attempt to reveal the deep psychic sources of the essentially intuitive and inhumanly cynical ease with which the final solution was carried out.

Humanities do not humanize

“To shoot a man because you disagree with him about Hegel’s dialectic is after all to honor the human spirit.”²⁴ This statement uttered by Steiner during one of his lectures in the University of Cambridge in the late 1960s caused a stir in academia. Moreover, after reaffirming these words when asked during an interview for an English faculty position whether he had uttered them and whether they were meant to be taken seriously, Steiner had to leave without getting the job. He left academia for a time, going freelance and subsequently taking over from Edmund Wilson as chief literary reviewer at *The New Yorker*.²⁵ Irrelevant as this incident may seem, this more or less amusing *causa* shows a glimpse of Steiner’s sometimes problematic reception among scholars.

Much hurt and anger was caused by Steiner’s essay “The Hollow Miracle,” three paragraphs of which even instigated a special issue of a prominent German journal.²⁶ The controversy arose over his proposition that the post-war miracle in Germany was only a material resurrection accomplished by means of “a profound deadness of spirit.”²⁷ Once again, the general line of argument is grounded in the relation between language and political inhumanity. “It was one of the peculiar horrors of the Nazi era that all that happened was recorded, catalogued, chronicled, set down; that words were committed to saying things no human mouth should ever have said and no paper made by man should ever have been inscribed with.”²⁸ As a result, the German language died. The inhuman gibberish of the Nazi propaganda, the cheapness, perversity and mendacity of slogans and clichés turned the language upside down. It is no longer the language of Goethe, Heine and Mann, no longer “the vessel of human grace and the prime carrier of civilization.”²⁹ Poisoned by falsehood and sadism, Steiner claims that it fails in communicating truth or human values as demonstrated by the decline and impotence of German post-war literature.³⁰ Moreover, Steiner draws a parallel between this diminution of language and the deliberate forgetting of the past in the new Germany. Once the language is infected with falsehood, once the words are corrupt and the grammar of

23 Gershom Scholem, cit. in David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Kabbalah and Counter-History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 185.

24 George Steiner, “Il Postino,” *The Guardian*, April 19, 2008, available at: <<https://www.the-guardian.com/books/2008/apr/19/society>>.

25 The collection of Steiner’s best *New Yorker* reviews was published in 2009. Vide *George Steiner at The New Yorker* (New York: New Directions, 2009).

26 *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* (May 1963).

27 George Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle,” *Language and Silence Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman*, by George Steiner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 96.

28 Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle,” 99.

29 Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle,” 109.

30 Consider also Peter Handke’s comment on the state of German contemporary literature in 1966 during the visit of *Gruppe 47* in Princeton.

lies becomes a standard constituent of public discourse, even the most shocking atrocities may be rationalized. The turning point, according to Steiner, was 1948 and the establishment of the new *Deutschmark* and a renewed Germany marked by hard work fervor. The whole German nation, with its proverbial diligence and vigor, worked days and nights to rebuild the devastated country. Germany was clinging to a new myth, looking straight ahead, with no time to ruminate over past horrors. With this work-hard-and-get-prosperous attitude Germans were susceptible to downplaying the cruelties of the Nazi régime. Finally, and most importantly, they have partially resorted to strategic amnesia by insisting that they *did not* know what was happening. Steiner, however, is adamantly opposed to any attempts to belittle the past: most Germans “may not have known about the mechanics of the gas ovens [...]. But when the house next door was emptied overnight of the tenants, or when Jews, with their yellow star sewn on their coats, were barred from the air-raid shelters and made to cower in the open, burning streets, only a blind cretin could not have known.”³¹

An inquiry into the relation between language and political inhumanity is a part of Steiner’s zealous life-long attempt to penetrate into humanist predicament, which is, after all, the utmost task of a *Kulturkritik*. His book-length essay *In Bluebeard’s Castle* explores the phenomenology of “internal relations between the structures of the inhuman and the surrounding contemporary matrix of high civilization.”³² What are the causes of the barbaric urge within cultures, of a blatant alliance between European high culture and Nazi barbarism in the 20th century? How did the most gruesome crimes against humanity spread out from Central Europe, with its rich network of universities, galleries, cafés and concert halls? Why the frappant impotence of high civilization *vis-à-vis* inhumanity?

Steiner’s point of departure in his re-definition of culture is a common nostalgic imagining of nineteenth-century England and Western Europe as “an imagined garden of liberal culture.” This image refers to an orderly world of pleasant and safe streets, a stable middle-class life, high and increasing literacy and a general unchallenged recognition of the civilizing role of arts, the sciences and technology, a myth of the 19th century he praises as a bygone golden age. It stands for an ideal in comparison to which we can evaluate our postmodern civilization and cultural products as decadent. Yet, surprisingly enough, Steiner argues that certain origins of the inhuman and of the crises of culture “are to be found in the long peace of the nineteenth century at the heart of the complex fabric of civilization.”³³ It is beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate on particular arguments such as the great *ennui* paralyzing Europe between 1815 to 1915, or the dehumanization in the modern city fully emerging in this period, but it must be acknowledged that this paradisiac vision of the liberal past can and has often come to be challenged.

Steiner’s focus on changing concepts of “culture” is also informed by tensions between culture and civilization which came to the fore by technological and scientific development in the 18th century. Although not homogenous in its forms of realization, the traditional concept of culture as “cultivation of mind” (Ciceronian *cultura animi*) was considered as the ultimate end of

31 Steiner, “The Hollow Miracle,” 107–108.

32 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 31.

33 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 17.

Western social and cultural development and organization, being almost synonymous to the idea of a civilized way of life. The second half of the 18th century saw the first efforts towards a revision of this concept, resulting in a chasm between culture and civilization. As Samuel Taylor Coleridge put it in his study on the constitution of church and state, “civilization is itself but a mixed good,” and such a nation in which the civilizing process is “not grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity” is “more fitly to be called a varnished than a polished people.”³⁴ In other words, civilization now acquires a slightly negative connotation as it deviates from harmonious development of character and becomes more a normative code of refined, yet also superficial, embellished manners. The contrast between authentic cultivation (*cultura animi*) and civilization (normative evaluation of the social order, ordered knowledge and the refinement of manners) is one of the characteristic features of the Romantic *Weltanschauung* as well as a formative issue of modernity. Steiner follows this distinction but devotes attention to the fact that both sides of this binary work on the assumption that art and general diffusion of knowledge through *litterae humaniores* is the key to the realization of morality and the establishment of a free, classless, hence more just society.

The popular assumption that the “humanities humanize” had not been seriously questioned until WWI,³⁵ following which during the 1920s there were increased attempts to (re)justify the entire concept of Western civilization, especially the humanities, within the changing course of events. Perhaps the most representative is Julien Benda’s study *The Treason of the Intellectuals* (1927), in which Benda argues that European intellectuals in the 19th and 20th century had been seduced to serve under totalitarian regimes.³⁶ Steiner elaborates on this line of argument while challenging the high culture belief that getting to know the best which has been thought and said would bring to masses “sweetness and light.”³⁷ He juxtaposes this with “the brutal paradox,” i.e. the fact that the walls of Buchenwald were built in the vicinity of Goethe’s garden in Weimar; that some of the personnel in the death camps who operated the ovens were connoisseurs of Rilke, Bach, Mozart. Moreover: how is it possible that great art, music, literature may in so many instances flourish within absolutism and totalitarian régimes? The popular assumption Western culture worked on – i.e. that an extension of collective knowledge correlates with increased social stability and orderly government – is now a relic of “golden times” and, more importantly, the source of “our new stoic or ironic pessimism” characterizing the Western “post-culture” condition.³⁸ By coining the latter term Steiner highlights the fact that the post-war mass culture is no longer based on the presumption of permanence but the immediate. The products of this post-culture, which he sees as “an absurd hybrid,” are made for maximal impact and instant obsolescence, aiming at customers to seduce rather than at a populace to enlighten. The Arnoldian democratization of high culture

34 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State* (London: William Pickering, 1839), 46.

35 For instance as expressed in Vorticism.

36 Julien Benda, *The Treason of Intellectuals*, translated by Richard Aldington (1927; Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006).

37 The classic formulation of this view is Matthew Arnold’s essay *Culture and Anarchy* (1868; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955).

38 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 65.

had failed, as the products of classic literacy are either “thinned and adulterated” as disseminated in the mass market or “salvaged out of life and put in the museum walls.”³⁹

Yet this is not the most controversial and startling proposition, as Steiner goes on one step further. Not only is there no necessary correlation between high literacy and humanism: it may be that under certain circumstances, amplified by a sensibility and current state of mind of a reader, great literature or music distracts us from reality, i.e. by reading a poem or listening to a piece of music we may become so moved as to become less receptive to real-life matters. Steiner calls this bizarre inertia “the Cordelia syndrome,” referring, of course, to King Lear’s daughter in the last scene in act 5 in which Lear carrying his dead child in his arms shrieks “never” five times in a row. “I try to read that with my students,” Steiner explains how

I know those scenes by heart, and they live in me. But when I’m on my way home and hear someone yell ‘Help’ in the streets, my ears might hear, but I’m not listening [...] I should run to help; but I don’t because what’s actually occurring in the street has a sort of disorder to it, a contingency that doesn’t reach the transcendent immensity of the suffering that is described in a great work of art.⁴⁰

This premise has tremendous implications. Among other questions, it impels us to ask if it is also possible that the humanities can make us inhuman.

Conclusion

The title of this paper intimates the notion of Steiner’s essays as being heretical Heresy, *sensu stricto*, connotes an opinion or doctrine contrary to church dogma. But in a broader sense of this word, heresy also means dissent, deviation from a dominant theory or practice contrary to generally accepted beliefs or standards. To use “heresy” in connection with Steiner’s statements and assumptions seems to be irrelevant and eccentric, yet seen from the perspective of the latter definition one finds corresponding features. Hence also the metaphor of Bluebeard’s myth, which fits for most of Steiner’s oeuvre. The story of Bluebeard in this case refers to Béla Bartók’s operatic treatment of an old French folk tale conceptualizing a descent into a soul of a man, into dark secret chambers with doors never to be opened by a woman. Steiner’s adaptation expands the metaphor: does Western civilization have any secret chambers, any sealed doors which upon opening may lead us on to realities beyond human comprehension and control? “Ought genetic research to continue if it will lead to truths about differentiations in the species whose moral, political, psychological consequences we are unable to cope with?”⁴¹ Steiner believes that opening doors “is the tragic merit of our identity”⁴² and that a popular cult of political correctness should not become an obstacle discouraging us from forward motion. It is in the light of this dilemma that his queries set a model. Even left without a clear answer, merely by his effort to explore the basic inhumanity at the heart of the humanities, to examine why high culture – especially that of the twentieth-century – has

39 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 110.

40 Steiner, *A Long Saturday Conversations*, 79.

41 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 104.

42 Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle*, 106.

so often morally and even spiritually weakened humanity. In projecting how the humanities can make us inhuman, Steiner is opening one of the doors in Bluebeard's castle. When the new reality beyond an unlocked door is positive, it is usually celebrated as an act of a prophet. When negative, a heretic is being born.

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