



George Steiner

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

George Steiner is Extraordinary Fellow at Churchill College, Cambridge. Technically that means that he lectures one term out of three and lives on freelance writing rather than teaching. But "extraordinary" can be applied to him in the ordinary sense of the word. By virtue of his contributions to the fields of classical knowledge, to the most recent developments in anthropology, linguistic science, and the media, he is a Renaissance man, an all-round scholar in an absolute age, when the choice must normally be made between the Dilettante and the Specialist.

He is one of the few Cambridge academics whose views make the news and are of interest to the general public- recently his lectures 'In Bluebeards Castle -Notes Towards a Redefinition of Culture' were broadcast on Radio 3. His Extraordinary Fellowship is a positive advantage giving him more freedom than any other academic within the University system. Indeed, it is difficult to visualize him confined to any faculty or system other than his own. His independent approach exults in startling, reversing, and revising all commonly held views. In fact, sex is the only subject on which his views do not deviate from the norm. He is in favour of co-education (Churchill is one of the three mixed colleges) and gaily states "You know and I know that a day without sex is a day without sunshine."

"I was born in Paris, and schooled in France. From there I went to Chicago University, and then Harvard. Actually, I haven't got a first language. I went to Balliol to do a D.Phil. in the Faculty of Comparative Studies and Philosophy of literature in 1952 during the Korean War. Oxford wasn't as welcoming as it might have been. But my supervisor Humphrey House was a master scholar had he lived, he would have been one of the greats. No doubt Oxford was in transition when I was there." Dr. Steiner is confident that the Faculty has changed, and is excited by the new mixed options that are being introduced at the moment.

Was he aware of any difference between Oxford and Cambridge? "Yes. Enormous. I'm closer to Berkeley and M.I.T. here than I am to London. Cambridge is quiet, beautiful, and unreal. Oxford is part of the world.....in a rooted sense. And its nerve-ends are in London, and always have been. For 700 years, Oxford has been famous for politics, classics, and theology; Cambridge for maths, physics, and poetry."



But what about the teaching of English Literature or more broadly the teaching of any literature in a university?

"English Studies lack a back-bone. Few people have any grounding in the classics or in Anglo-Saxon and so cannot understand the basis on which writers work. In any case few people at twenty have anything sound and original to say. Criticism is inspired gossip and emotional relief. People study English for the same reason that they studied Theology – to find themselves. To me this seems demoralizing. A training in Modern Linguistics could replace a grounding in Classics and would give back to Literary Studies technical severity and professional self-respect. In any case, it's worth studying in itself. A lot of what semiologists say is twaddle, but Jakobson, Spitzer do have something to say."

In his book *Language and Silence* which is required reading for any student of literature, Dr. Steiner analysed topics such as: whether the humanities humanize people; whether language, having been abused and prostituted by political rhetoric and the consequent atrocities of World War II, has been destroyed; whether language is capable of giving expression to 'the new realities' of Physics, Mysticism, and other expanding fields. "It seems to me that articulate thought is in itself a kind of attack on the world which will prove of more importance to the future of language study than the metamathematical models." Although Dr. Steiner advocates a more rigorous approach towards the study of language, Chomsky is not his favourite linguist. "Chomsky is wrong about innate structures which over-simplify and are trivially deep.....let me explain.....they are of the order of such statements as 'we all breathe oxygen.' The OUP has commissioned me to do a Study on Multi-Linguistics, and the problem of how the mind shifts from one language to another. This kind of problem finds Chomsky's examples entirely unconvincing."

He applies the same serious yet unpedantic approach to topics which one feels are not so worthy of his critical eye. He takes it with him to the cinema; "I'm a movie-goer. But I'm sure I'm right...a film doesn't last after five viewings. A poem does and so does a symphony. But even the greatest film has obsolescence built into it. It's an ephemeral form; perhaps the identity of the experience kills it. I love Renoir, Bunuel, but for us Bergman is 'deja-eu' as Time Out said. Though I wish I'd said it." As for television, "Well, Radio is more inventive and radical. But television might hold something in store for the future of education."

I asked him what he thought of psychoanalysis. For him Freud is a poet and not a psychologist. "He has



given us a new insight into language. We read and speak differently. We dream differently, for dreams are culture-bound. Freud changed the life of the imagination but he did not develop a method as he set out to.”

George Steiner writes like he talks. Open a book of his at any page – the sentences will be entertaining, original, provocative. He writes and talks with a self confidence that beguiles, making allusions and relating ideas. During our conversation, he failed to give his opinions only on politics, but said they could be read in a recent 'New Statesman' article anyway. One can only categorise him as perversely polymorphous.

Forty years ago, Leavis revolutionised the study of English Literature at Cambridge. Is it not perhaps time for a new Re-evaluation?

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