



The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan

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With his hallmark forceful discernment, George Steiner presents in *The Poetry of Thought* his magnum opus: an examination of more than two millennia of Western culture, staking out his claim for the essential oneness of great thought and great style. Sweeping yet precise, moving from essential detail to bracing illustration, Steiner spans the entire history of philosophy in the West as it entwines with literature, finding that, as Sartre stated, in all philosophy there is “a hidden literary prose.”

“The poetic genius of abstract thought,” Steiner believes, “is lit, is made audible. Argument, even analytic, has its drumbeat. It is made ode. What voices the closing movements of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* better than Edith Piaf’s *non de non*, a twofold negation which Hegel would have prized? This essay is an attempt to listen more closely.”

The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan Details

Date : Published January 24th 2012 by New Directions (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN : 9780811219457

Author : George Steiner

Format : Hardcover 192 pages

Genre : Philosophy, Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Poetry, Criticism, Literary Criticism

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Rhys says

The book was interesting, but it felt like I was reading lecture notes, or an outline to a much larger book. The book did, however, expand my to-read list.

"But an axis of differentiation is at work. There are the builders of systems, the architects of enclosure and addicts of totality such as Aristotle, Hegel or Comte. And there are the raiders, often solitary, on meaning and the world, the technicians of lightening striking as it were from the periphery, "lightning" being in both Heraclitus and Nietzsche a methodological password."

Tom says

George Steiner is a syncretist in the best sense of the word. Like Fredric Jameson, his main powers are those of summary and synthesis, with each of his books being a journey through, and explanation of, the entire Western tradition. *The Poetry of Thought* is no different. A master stylist and formidable thinker in his own right, Steiner seeks to show the common linguistic ground of literature and philosophy, that both depend upon "style." As he writes in the introduction, "Argument, even analytic, has its drumbeat. It is made ode."

In nine chapters totaling 217 pages, Steiner takes the reader whizzingly past all the major touchstones of the European philosophical tradition, from Heraclitus to Nietzsche, Plato to Agamben, Augustine and Aquinas to Sartre and Wittgenstein. He draws on perhaps eight linguistic traditions, mentioning dozens of versions of the Faust legend, emphasizing the importance of Galileo's reading of Ariosto and Tasso. A typical paragraph, like this one on Hegel's lack of stylistic grace, reads thus:

To consider Hegel as a *writer* verges on *lèse-majesté*. Is there any great philosopher seemingly less stylish, more averse to "spirited language" and elegance - "*geistreiche Sprache*" - as he found it in the French *philosophes*? Friends amended Hegel's tortuous syntax, so often derived from laboriously spoken, opaque lectures, abounding in rebarbative neologisms and Swabian locutions. The young Heine, even before a brief personal contact in 1822, was among the first of many who parodied the master's idiom. But the crux is not one of literary, rhetorical finish or welcoming suavity, let alone poetic inspiration.

Along the way, Steiner employs his characteristically punchy style. Here he is on the linguistic naïveté of classic psychoanalysis: "For Freud nothing cataclysmic has happened to the *Logos* since the *Nichomachean Ethics*." Giordano Bruno is described as an "imager of heretical infinities." Lucretius as "the most *Latin* of Roman poets." Adorno "yielded to the charms of obscurity." "Disinterested cerebral and sensory passion," we are told, "can no more be explained than love."

Yet for all the wonders of his prose, Steiner's two recurrent flaws become glaringly obvious in *The Poetry of Thought*: superficiality and Eurocentrism. As to the first, Steiner should not be blamed for such faults; it is part of the trade of the syncretist to pre-digest entire libraries of thought and touch upon them only through allusion and brief quotation. Like Confucius, Steiner lifts up one corner of a subject, expecting the student to

pick up the other three (*Analects* VII.8).

Which brings me to Steiner's second (and more serious) flaw: his intense Eurocentrism. Although many of Steiner's books make claims to universality (see also *After Babel* and *Real Presences*), he is so steeped in the traditions of classical Europe, especially as it comes to us through twentieth-century French and German philosophy, that he seemingly cannot conceive of the rest of the world. I counted two references to the Chinese tradition in this book, one of which was actually to Borges. Islamic thinkers, too, only receive mention through Borges. Russia is important only as a check on Marx. Not to mention the lack of anything related to the civilizations of South Asia, Africa, non-European America. This ignorance would not be so irksome if Steiner would just fess up to it, state at the outset that he aims to work within a very specific tradition and not make gestures toward universality.

As it is, George Steiner has left us a very valuable essay on the interconnections between literature and philosophy in the classical European tradition. *The Poetry of Thought* is intellectual candy for the Western humanist, a source of brief, penetrating insights into some very difficult works, written with style and grace. But, like all syncretisms, something is lost in the mix.

Justin says

Fascinating stuff.

Stephen Wong says

Taking a cue from Martin Heidegger's *Denken und Dichten*, the author moves beyond mere erudition (which in George Steiner is vast, compelling and programmatic) and intertextuality (or I might in this instance call it meta-intertextuality) into the ineluctable observation that the reach of both philosophy and poetry is by a common effort and by the same hand limited but mutually informing and supporting. It is a place of great care for the project of reflection (at least insofar as the Western thought tradition is considered) which matters in the understanding of certain impulses of thought, and in the saying of something and in not saying it. What the author lays out in the essay are a good many examples of intersections as well as a longitudinal presentation of a number of poet-philosophers (and philosopher-poets) and their sometimes more obscure works. The author is clear to point certain gaps in his readings especially where yet-to-be-published diaries, letters and other oeuvre of some of the writers considered are due. There is an effort to signify where over-reading is taking place, which is not at all the habit in the practice of deconstruction and post-structuralism. Overall, the author is a helpful guide into the territory where the frontier is, though not treacherous, a place of important discovery and of significant beauty which would otherwise be easy to miss and easier to dismiss.

A book like Steiner's could certainly benefit from the use of an index. The book has no index of topics or such lexical categories. The reader is expected to re-read and re-refer and perhaps to move forward even if only by way of gloss and marginalia.

Jim Coughenour says

"The phenomenology of pure thought is almost daemonic in its strangeness." I've thought that myself. But if you haven't read the books of the hierophantic, hyper-erudite George Steiner, this book is probably not the place to begin. (Visit *In Bluebeard's Castle*.)

The temper of Steiner's mandarin musings has always been a bit feverish, the mood that of the "crisis theologians" of the 20th century, of existentialist extremity. Ultimate realities are often at stake. For the reader this means the high drama of ideas: Can we write poetry after Auschwitz? What was said – or more crucially, *not said* – when Heidegger and Celan took their walk through the dark woods of Germany? I'm only mocking a bit. I've been reading Steiner with admiration, appreciation and, yes, amusement ever since I was handed *Language and Silence* in the mid-70s — a book that proved to me on its first page that I'd never know as much as its author.

Another (very good) review on this page faults Steiner for being superficial and Eurocentric. *Superficial* isn't quite right. Steiner talks in the elite ellipsis of the classic humanities - a gliding reference indicates that he's not only familiar with a master's work but also with its attendant controversies and arcane affinities. One of the pleasures of reading Steiner is following his asides to discover whole avenues of achievement - authors and works otherwise forgotten. In this book he inspired me to actually read Paul Valéry's *Monsieur Teste* and seek out the poet Durs Grünbein (to whom the book is dedicated).

As for his Eurocentrism – well, of course. Is this really something that requires an apology? No one can be a genius about everything; to be original and intelligent about anything is an accomplishment that escapes most of us. Steiner has been torturing himself with the irresolvable contradictions of Western thought for the past 60 years. His passion for continental philosophy and its eviscerations is everywhere evident, but he is never its apologist. Heidegger and his lesser epigones amaze him; they also elicit scathing contempt.

That said, there is the inadvertent comedy of his prose that has often proved too much, even for his admirers. Never one phrase where two will do. A rhetorical overpainting that easily muddies – an example almost at random, relating to the book's subject: "Scarcely any component of our theme, of the relations both substantive and historical between philosophy and poetics, between performative style and philosophic argument, between philosophers and poets *in propria persona* does not have an absolutely determinant place in Heidegger's teachings." Prose like this cumbers every page. It's obviously the way Steiner thinks, the sentence form obsessively striving for both sinuous precision and philosophic depth. Every artist has his tics. Books have been hurled against the wall for less. *Caveat lector*.

Reading Steiner makes me feel like an intellectual anarchist stepping into the hushed cathedral of humanism. I don't want to worship, but I'm happy that it's still somewhat intact, that the high priests (aging and aching) are still doing their job. Steiner — he knows as well as anyone — is a kind of magister who will soon be gone and will not be replaced.

Kati Stevens says

Maybe you'll find this book comprehensible if you have a serious background in German philosophy, but I

personally found it largely unreadable. Though he clearly didn't intend to do so, Steiner's prose did a swell job of propelling me toward anti-intellectualism.

Also no one should use the word 'hermeneutic' that much.

Lysergius says

George Steiner sets out in this "short essay", his own words to:

"The point I am trying to clarify is simple: literature and philosophy as we have known them are products of language. Unalterably that is the common ontological and substantive ground. Thought in poetry, the poetics of thought are deeds of grammar, of language in motion. Their, means, their constraints are those of style. The unspeakable, in the direct sense of that word, circumscribes both."

and he contends that

"Poetry aims to reinvent language, to make it new,. Philosophy labours to make language rigorously transparent, to purge it of ambiguity and confusion."

I for one would not argue with this. His survey of the poetic and the philosophic cover a large proportion of the western canon and make for fascinating reading, and a test of the limits of one's erudition.

His thoughts on the modern world of "digital noise" are heartfelt. A book to be savoured.

John Pistelli says

Why have I become addicted to reading George Steiner? Oblique answers below.

This is an essay—and Steiner stresses that it is indeed an “essay,” in the Montaignean sense of “trial”—about the failure of philosophy. Philosophy has longed to be like mathematics or music: a mode of pure reason, mastering human experience because unsullied by reference to experience’s inevitable and perhaps ungovernable mess and murk. But philosophy takes place in language, and language is, whatever else it is, a means to reference experience. Indeed, by the time we get to Nietzsche and Saussure, it gets worse: language, even considered in itself, is a mess, an ever-failing system of signifiers “slipping,” as the post-structuralists liked to say, as if on grease or slime. Poetry, whether defined referentially (as mimesis, per Aristotle) or semiotically (per postmodern theory), has tended to accept, in varying ways, the inevitable complexities language involves. So Steiner’s essay largely narrates—in a very roughly chronological montage—philosophy’s becoming-poetry, its fortunate fall into the word-flesh.

Steiner’s aforementioned Eurocentrism (“What theorem out of Africa?” he invidiously inquires in this book) illustrates why some of us—non-Europeans or, like myself, the wrong kind of European—feel no particular loyalty to philosophy qua philosophy at all (Steiner regards as at least arguable Heidegger’s contention that philosophy can only occur in Greek and German; I recall that Derrida, by way of contrast, has stressed the Latinity of literature, and I distantly recall too a lecture by R. A. Judy wherein he pledged his fealty to poetry over philosophy because in philosophy a black man could only be an object rather than a subject of thought).

Steiner rightly cites Borges (a Latin!—albeit also an Anglophile and a philo-Semite) on the indivisibility of poetry and philosophy (and theology—which, like music and the pure sciences, hover around the edge of this argument):

Borges infers that all philosophical propositions (however stringent), that every formal logic are daydreams, that they manifest the systematic reveries of the woken intellect. In Goya's etching the sleep of reason breeds monsters. In Borges both the night-dreams and the daydreams of rationality engender Zeno's tortoise, Plato's cavern, Descartes's malignant demon or Kant's starlit imperatives. As Hamlet instructs Horatio, the matter of philosophy is "dreamt of." Concomitantly there is no literary text, be it a lyric poem, a detective story, science fiction or romance which does not contain, either declared or veiled, metaphysical coordinates, logical axioms or spoors of epistemology. Man narrates worlds possibly alternative, contrapuntal to his bounded, parochial reality.

On the other hand, a species of total and unsullied abstraction may be, at least contingently, a cultural and geographical matter (even so, can one exclude China or India, both of which, per a lamenting Justin E. H. Smith, have traditions of "philosophy" as the term is meant in the West?). The mathematicians and the physicists have no doubt given us good reason to be grateful, but I feel no ontological sense of inferiority over my incapacity for abstract thought. A C-student in physics and calculus, a failed reader of Spinoza and Leibniz and Kant, a "poet" who, like so many poets, largely has to make due with Plato and Nietzsche for philosophy—sure, I am all those things, but, given the thinking I am able to do in images (including images of action), I defer to no philosopher.

The best passages in this book are those on Plato, Hegel, Marx, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger. Each is treated at length and in relation to the poets. The section on Plato made me feel an urgent need to go beyond the undergraduate standards. The section on Hegel, considered in relation to Hölderlin and then to modern drama, gave me a new list of plays to read soon (Strindberg! Genet!); and Steiner's defense of Hegel's style and anti-style—as *prose* in the best sense of the term—is oddly charming, if one can be charmed by the thought of Hegel. Steiner's bravura passage—pages of nineteenth-century energy—on Marx's reading and his style, his love of Shakespeare and of the realist novelists, his Swiftian mastery of all the registers of contempt, may be a coded commentary on the left-classicism that drew some of us, in the age of the canon wars, to Marxism in the first place. Steiner's eulogy to Marxism in spite of all—as the apogee of the West's moral adventure, its climactic combination of the Hebraic ethics and the Hellenic reason—is worth quoting at length, though I do not think I can accept it, ultimately, thinking as I do that utopias, like super-heroes, really *must* be outgrown:

No less than Homer's *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid*, Marx's analytic and critical narrative has as its archetype a journey homeward. Ernst Bloch summarizes memorably: a site "which irradiates childhood and where no one has yet been: homeland." That this voyage should have led to despotism and suffering, to monstrous injustice and corruption, that it vainly sought to negate what Hegel had called the tragic essence of history, does not invalidate the grandeur of the dream. It refutes but does not devalue the compliment which utopian socialism pays to mankind's potential for altruism and betterment. When the true revolution comes, proclaimed Trotsky, "the average human type will rise to the heights of an Aristotle, a Goethe or a Marx." The *Manifesto* turns to Shakespeare: with the overthrow of the old order, "all that is solid melts into air." The quote from *The Tempest*, the salute to Aristotle and Goethe are no ornamental flourishes. They tell of one of the great, tragic adventures of the human spirit, of philosophy seeking to transmute itself into that other voice of poetry which is action.

Steiner's excursus on Wittgenstein's beguilingly aphoristic style—and its relation to Beckett—amused me.

Steiner draws his narrative to an end with Heidegger. The erstwhile Rector of Freiburg (another philosopher with whom I have never gotten very far) is too compromised—and moreso by recent publications out of the archive—to admire, and yet Paul Celan was able to expect from him a word from the heart. Steiner ends, before an epilogue, with the two men together in silence, a “silence both safeguarding and trying to transcend the limits of speech which are, as in the very name of that hut [Todtnauberg], also those of death.”

After this scene, Steiner provides a brief epilogue on “the radical break with the western historical past” represented by all the counter-verbal trends of the present. Gloomy as ever, Steiner nevertheless strikes a note more hopeful than I am accustomed to from his prose:

Yet it may be a formidable adventure. And somewhere a rebellious singer, a philosopher inebriate with solitude, will say “No.” A syllable charged with the promise of creation.

Omissions? I grasp Steiner’s relative avoidance of Nietzsche (he gives him only three pages) since everyone pretty much knows already that N. was a poet; but I still would have liked more, and, relatedly, more on Schopenhauer. Steiner’s evasion of theology, *sensu stricto*, causes a neglect of Dante and Aquinas, who might have formed the centerpiece of the book. And why not more on Shakespeare and Montaigne? There are many pages devoted to major figures in the French and German tradition that I, as a vulgar American who has spent too much time reading writers not even mentioned in this book (such as Emerson), do not know as well as I should or at all—Valéry, for instance, or, again, Hölderlin. But this is my problem, not Steiner’s.

As I recently read in Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, the essay should be regarded as the short form of the confession, just as the short story is the short form of the novel and the tale the short form of the romance. So Steiner’s style—both his relentlessly morose and high-minded sensibility and the grave drama of his prose (all those periodic sentences with their intellectual suspense and mounting intensity, all those near-desperate allusions to the masters, like one calling on the gods)—is the confession, a confession not foreign to advanced fiction in the age of Beckett, Bernhard, and Sebald, of the illuminated European on the eve of his final departure. That—well, that and the book recommendations—is why I love to read George Steiner.

Fabio Fraccaroli says

E se la filosofia non fosse altro che il proseguimento della poesia con altri mezzi?

O se preferite il poetare non altro che un filosofare più ardito, essenziale, inevitabile al pensiero?

"In tutta la filosofia, ha ammesso Sartre, c'è «una prosa letteraria nascosta»."

Certo è che entrambe queste arti -mai come qui visceralmente vicine- condividono (nella loro storia comune fino almeno all'inizio di questo nuovo secolo) una fede- fiducia-speranza che è anche irrimediabile abbandono/sconforto per e al linguaggio.

"Sotto quali aspetti una proposizione filosofica, perfino nella nudità della logica di Frege, è una retorica?"

Filosofia, poesia, alta letteratura: arti di parole per scelta e loro malgrado.

"Come dice R.G. Collingwood nel suo *Essay on Philosophic Method* (1933): «Se il linguaggio non riesce a spiegare sé stesso, nient'altro può spiegarlo». Quindi la lingua della filosofia è «come sa già ogni attento lettore di grandi filosofi, una lingua letteraria e non tecnica»."

Il buon Steiner navigato comparatista (di letture più che di letterature) argomenta quasi più con ben tornite aforistiche citazioni che con verbose dimostrazioni e proprio così convince, forse più che altro, che questa storia incrociata di filosofia e poesia (più che vite parallele di filosofi e poeti, comuni sentieri ininterrotti) sia giunta ad una sicura fine.

Oltre quel 900 ormai finito (nuove tecniche, altre distillatori di ragioni e fide: homo_ludens@

imperodelleformiche.com) si apre un altro modo d'intendere e di fare, dove la parola-poetante e le filosofie della parola (detta perchè scritta o viceversa) molto probabilmente non avranno più un granché da dire, o al limite un non richiesto senso ineluttabile (nel bene e nel male)...

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"Ogni singola lingua disegna un mondo possibile, un paesaggio e un calendario possibili. Imparare una lingua significa allargare i confini del provincialismo dell'io in maniera incommensurabile. È spalancare una nuova finestra sull'esistenza."

"La poesia tradisce il proprio daimon quando è troppo pigra o troppo soddisfatta di sé per pensare profondamente."

"«Questa mania per le spiegazioni! Mettere i puntini sulle i fino alla morte!» Beckett ci ingiunge di fallire, fallire ancora ma «fallire meglio», individua la congiunzione sinaptica in cui pensiero e poesia, doxa e letteratura si compenetrano. «È l'inizio che è difficile.»"

Valery: «Conoscere il mondo è costruirlo» «L'istante genera la forma e la forma rende visibile l'istante.»: la danza «un mistico senza Dio».

Ma una grande filosofia «non è quella che è priva di brecce. È quella che ha roccaforti» Péguy: "Pensare correttamente significa comportarsi in maniera responsabile"

"La vita si dissecca nelle nostre dissezioni esplicative. I contemporanei si facevano beffe della «legnosità del buon Hegel» o disapprovavano, come Goethe, le sue «boscaglie di esoterismo». Ma Hegel era alle prese con un paradosso fondamentale: la cancellazione della sostanza da ciò che la definisce e la nomina. Solo la grande letteratura può preservare l'essere all'interno della designazione."

"Marx mette in discussione tutte le istituzioni e tutti i rapporti di potere; respinge le illusioni autoingannevoli e l'infantilismo della religione; spietata è la sua confutazione delle ideologie rivali; e inesorabile il suo disprezzo nei confronti dell'accettazione supina degli stereotipi delle convenzioni sociali. Ma, in nessun momento, Marx dubita della capacità del linguaggio, e soprattutto della parola scritta, di rappresentare, analizzare, modificare la realtà individuale e collettiva, di rimodellare la condizione umana." «La critica non è una passione del cervello; è il cervello della passione».

"La narrativa moderna d'avanguardia è integralmente filosofica."

"Bergson: riandando alle sue opere, si percepisce un aroma al contempo piacevole e antiquato che ricorda quello di lavanda negli armadi per la biancheria della belle époque".

"La tradizione avverte che Gerusalemme uccide i suoi profeti e Atene i suoi pensatori."

"Ciò che Sigmund Freud ha fatto è stato «colonizzare», secondo l'illuminante espressione usata da Mann, un territorio già scoperto e in buona parte cartografato da pionieri filosofici."

"Il vuoto è reso fertile (« le vide frai » [...] Char infonde energia alla lingua attraverso accenni metafisici più antichi rispetto alla servitù della logica, oracolari nel senso delfico del «segnalare» le possibilità prima che esse siano congelate nelle banalità logorate dall'uso. «Nessun uccello è in vena di cantare in un cespuglio di problemi.» «Amo l'uomo incerto dei suoi fini. Come lo è, in aprile, l'albero da frutto.»"

"C'è un elemento estremamente delicato, «off-limits», che riguarda l'aura di Wittgenstein, la mitologia che fin dall'inizio ha circondato il suo personaggio, il suo modo di essere. Questa mitologia comprende deformazioni tipologiche ben note nella storia della meditazione e della pratica filosofiche: il fascino per l'estrema solitudine, per il ritiro ascetico in luoghi praticamente inaccessibili come Skjolden in Norvegia (ricordi del Brand ibseniano) o come la campagna irlandese. C'è un alone di astensione sessuale, se di questo si trattava, da anacoreta kierkegaardiano. Wittgenstein presceglie per sé periodi di umiltà monastica come orticoltore, maestro di scuola elementare o inserviente d'ospedale. Diogene e Pascal avrebbero approvato." «Le rose al buio sono rosse?» «Esiste il tempo presente del verbo “sognare”?» Wittgenstein annota sul suo diario nel luglio del 1916: «Si può vivere in modo che la vita cessi di essere problematica? Che si viva nell'eterno e non nel tempo?».

"Rimanere incantati è cosa diversa da comprendere. [...] Croce aspirava all'«incarnazione dell'arte come idea» (una notazione hegeliana)."

"Come accade con una grande traduzione – un esercizio che affascinava il poliglotta Borges –, la sua

incidenza sulla storia, le arti, sulla testualità presa nel suo insieme, aggiunge «ciò che c'era già», un paradosso, ma a cui Borges riesce a conferire l'inquietante autorità dell'autoevidenza."

"La filosofia, la fenomenologia «parla come crescono gli alberi, come il tempo passa e come gli uomini parlano». Non cessa mai di essere incerta rispetto al proprio statuto esistenziale ed è inseparabile dall'espressione letteraria performativa. [...] Merleau-Ponty è perfettamente consapevole dell'abisso che lo separa dal cattolicesimo estatico, rituale di Claudel. «Semplicemente, neanche lo scrittore stesso sa sempre tramite cosa e in che cosa egli cambia il mondo – né lo sanno i suoi contemporanei.»"

"Dio, vale a dire il prodigio del senso comunicabile, sta nel dettaglio linguistico. Così è per il cabalista quando dalla singola lettera desume l'impulso e la magia della creazione. Le lettere sono scritte nel fuoco primigenio, dalla cui incandescenza è sorta tutta la filosofia, tutta la poesia e il paradosso del loro autonomo unisono. Ho suggerito che questa concezione del linguaggio come nucleo determinante dell'essere, come donazione, teologica in fin dei conti, di umanità all'uomo, sia ora in uno stato di recessione. Che né nel suo statuto ontologico, né nella sua portata esistenziale, la parola riesca più a mantenere la propria tradizionale centralità. Questo mio piccolo libro, l'interesse e l'attenzione che spera di ottenere presso i suoi lettori (statisticamente una minuscola minoranza), il vocabolario e la grammatica in cui è esposto, sono già per molti aspetti qualcosa di arcaico. Si rifanno alle arti monastiche dell'attenzione dell'alto medioevo, per esempio, o alla biblioteca dell'epoca vittoriana. Mal si accordano con la riduzione di testi letterari per lo schermo o con l'antiretorica dei blog. La pura e semplice sopravvivenza di un saggio come questo dipende dalla sua accessibilità on line."

"La mente è «connessa». La memoria è fatta di dati recuperabili."

"Il meccanismo autodistruttivo della morte che tutto cancella non solo sarebbe accettato, ma in un certo qual modo incluso tra i fenomeni estetici e intellettuali. Il senso diventerebbe gioco: homo ludens. [...] Questa non è una visione dalla quale una coscienza obsoleta, spesso tecnofobica come la mia, possa trarre qualche conforto. Essa è conseguente al fatto che le «discipline umanistiche» ci hanno così desolatamente tradito nella lunga notte del XX secolo. Ma potrebbe comunque rivelarsi una bellissima avventura. E da qualche parte un cantore ribelle, un filosofo ebbro di solitudine dirà: «No». Una sillaba che è carica di una promessa di creazione."

Riet says

Een interessant essay over de verbinding tussen literatuur en poëzie. Steiner begint bij Plato en eindigt in onze tijd. Aan het eind is het vooral de verbinding tussen Paul Celan en de Duitse (nazi)filosoof Heidegger. Hij beslaat eigenlijk de hele westerse beschaving, Chinese of Japanse denkers komen niet aan bod. Aan te bevelen, als je in het onderwerp geïnteresseerd bent; anders misschien wel wat taai.

Matthew Linck says

I read this pretty quickly, maybe a slower reading would have revealed more. Perhaps Steiner expected his audience to find the notion that philosophical thought and the linguistic modes of its expression are intimately related to be more striking than I found it. And perhaps in certain circles such a notion runs against common opinion. In this way, the book did not convince me of anything new. But Steiner's writing is beautiful and often bracing, and there were a smattering of remarks and insights about Plato and Hegel that I found particularly enticing.

Christopher Sanderson says

I am not an intellectual, the book is well suited, I think, to intellectuals. However it is not difficult for the ordinary man such as myself to enjoy this well thought out and well presented work, especially if one is seeking references for future name dropping. I enjoyed the book, and I have already used quotations from this same source to impress others. Alas I received no response to my correspondence, such is the way of lost love.

Kay says

I first I was a little disappointed with the discursive quality of this essay but realized that Steiner was sharing so deeply held thoughts in this short essay and I was privileged to be let in on them. I am lucky to have the gift of Steiner's lifetime of serious reading and thinking.

Daniel Schechtel says

Masterpiece de erudición y camino.

George Steiner, lector prolífico y comentador admirable, portador de la avidez propia de un Borges o un Bloom o un Szondi, nos presenta una historia abreviada de la 'filosofía occidental' desde la relación entre su lenguaje y el propio de la literatura, arguyendo que ambos están íntimamente conectados, y que se influyen mutuamente.

El razonamiento de Steiner a veces se fuga en meandros anecdóticos o poéticos, en comentarios parentéticos alusivos (tres palabras que pueden llevarnos al universo de un autor antes desconocido) o en etimologías exquisitas. Las citas en las lenguas originales nos permiten degustar mejor lo que él mismo ha leído.

¿Logra Steiner demostrar su tesis? Difícil responder a semejante pregunta. A veces un poco forzadamente, a veces holgada pero legalmente, eventualmente descubriendo relaciones sorprendidas, me vi fluvialmente cuesta abajo con muelles cada diez metros que se adentraban en caminos como capilares. Es decir, para poder dar un buen análisis de esta obra hace falta haber leído lo que Steiner, y eso sería ya el trabajo de toda una vida dedicada a la lectura (que yo estoy caminando).

El libro es, sobre todo, una biblioteca infinita. Como mucho resta agregar alguna cita interesante:

Preeminently it is architecture which conjoins conceptual totality with constructed detail, stable form with internalized motion. (p. 74). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Philosophy endures by virtue of stylistic performance. (p. 76). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

“Reason bids the poet prefer rhyme to reason. . . . It is through this happy door that the idea gains entrance.” And both men agree that only poetry can realize the a priori of philosophy by achieving forms which circumscribe knowledge before there is knowing. (p. 77). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Nomination wakes the spirit from the anarchic drift of dreams and fables (cf. Plato's Cratylus). The history of language, the life of language are at the same time the history and life of the human spirit. Or as Hegel himself puts it: language is “the visible invisibility of the spirit”—though whether “spirit” or esprit come near to rendering Geist worries Derrida. (pp. 88-89). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Hegel's affirmations negate ("sublate") each other as the argument spirals. To say, as Parmenides intuited, is to say what is not. Negation is the axiomatic guarantor of liberty. Hence the positive imperative of death: "Il faut mourir en homme pour être un homme." Malraux and Sartre will elaborate. (p. 90). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Abstractions, idealizations are attempts to deny but also to inhabit the real world. Platonic-Christian rhetoric, the Johannine Logos alienate (that seminal *Entfremdung*) consciousness both from itself and concrete reality. These strategies of idealizing estrangement make of all modes of romanticism a dishevelled chitchat. *Stricto sensu* consciousness should revert to silence. Beckett is not far off. Yet only language can reveal being. Thus, for Hegel, literature does create (the point is finely made in Peter Szondi's study of Hegel's poetics). The world literature edifice originates in epic, lives in tragedy and dies in comedy. (p. 91). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

clarity and elegance are in respect of thought treacherous ideals. (p. 93). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

There is a perennial danger that abstraction, articulate conceptualization entail a loss of substance. Life drains out of our explicative anatomies. Contemporaries mocked "honestly wooden Hegel" or deplored, as did Goethe, his "thickets of esotericism." But Hegel was grappling with a central paradox: the effacement of substance by that which defines and names it. Only great literature can preserve being within designation. (p. 94). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Throughout this essay we encounter a polarity. There are thinkers, notably in the Anglo-American vein, who insist on clarity, on direct communication. There are those on the other hand, Plotinus, the German idealists, Heidegger among them, who see in neologisms, in densities of syntax, in stylistic opaqueness the necessary conditions of original insight. Why repeat what has been said plainly before? The dilemma is familiar to the icebreakers in literature, to Rimbaud, to Joyce, to Pound urging language "to make it new." Hegel produces "anti-texts" aiming at collision with the inert matter of the commonplace. They are, says Adorno, "films of thought" calling for experience rather than comprehension. Every good reading of Hegel is "an experiment." (pp. 95-96). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Where except in major poetry, drama or fiction are we closer to the immediacies, to the naked energies of "felt thought"? The phrase is awkward and uncomely. That, Hegel would insist, is not the point. (p. 105). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Romanticism and the nineteenth century were obsessed by the ideal and prestige of the epic. Chateaubriand, possessed by epic designs, translates *Paradise Lost*. Wordsworth aims for internalized epics in *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*. Balzac's *Comédie humaine* and Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* sequences proclaim epic dimensions. *La Légende des siècles* of Victor Hugo was to be an epic panorama of all history. At the close of his career Hugo composes theological-apocalyptic epics in rivalry with Dante and Milton. Consider Browning's *The Ring and the Book* or Hardy's *The Dynasts*. Panoptic immensities characterize post-romantic history paintings, architecture and the titanic scores of both Mahler and Bruckner. How else could sensibility respond to, compete with the Napoleonic saga and the gigantism of the industrial revolution? Three times, moreover, the epic dream was fully realized: in *Moby-Dick*, in *War and Peace* and in Wagner's *Ring*. Karl Marx's opera omnia can be experienced as an epic of thought, as an *Odyssey* out of darkness toward the far shores of justice and human felicity. (p. 113-115). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

To be possessed by an intellectual problem, pure or applied, by a total hunger for aesthetic form, by a resistant constellation in the sciences is to experience a libido—it can enlist madness and criminality—more compelling than that of sex. (p. 137). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Inexhaustible to interpretation, numberless in their variants, three narratives, three primordial tales tell of a fatal kinship between knowledge and retribution. The Tree of Knowledge in Eden provokes humankind to transgression, to lasting exile and misère. Prometheus is sentenced to unending torture for his theft of theoretical and practical sagacity from the jealous gods. The striving intellect of Faust overreaches and precipitates his soul into hell. An ineradicable crime attaches to the defining excellence of the human spirit. Measureless vengeance is visited on those who would “teach eternity” (Dante). Hunters after truth are in turn hunted as if some organic contradiction opposed the exercise of the mind and at-homeness in natural life. Yet the impulse to taste of the forbidden fruit, to steal and master fire, to pose ultimate questions as does Faust, is unquenchable. Be it at the cost of personal survival or of social ostracism. (p. 136). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Disinterested cerebral and sensory passion can no more be explained than love. (pp. 137-138). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Traditional warning has it that Jerusalem slays its prophets and Athens its thinkers. (p. 141). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

“What we call ‘understanding a sentence’ has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme than we might be inclined to think.” [that's Wittgenstein] (p. 169). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Hemingway generates propositions without commentary. (p. 191). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

language. It is not only, as Galileo taught, that nature speaks mathematics: it is, to a degree he could not have anticipated, that mathematical speech would become fantastically intricate and demanding. It is now accessible only to a mandarin of practitioners. In consequence the commonplace relations of language to phenomena, to our daily context have become virtually infantile. They are a bric-à-brac of inert metaphors (“sunrise”), of hoary fictions and handy falsifications. Our tables and chairs have nothing to do with their atomic, subatomic, complexly mobile reality. Our vulgate inhabits prefabricated clichés. Our “time” and “space” are archaic, almost allegoric banalities out of touch with relativistic algorithms. From the perspective of the theoretical and exact sciences we speak a kind of Neanderthal babble. (p. 195-196). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

(the Italian philosopher Agamben has stated that any verbalization of remembrance is per se a falsehood). (p. 197). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

For Heidegger the history of thought is one of recurrently recaptured contemporaneity. Misreadings such as Nietzsche on Plato or, almost irreparably, Cicero's helpless rendering into Latin of cardinal Greek philosophical terms will be unavoidable. Any dolt can correct Hölderlin's Greek. But it is these mutations which keep argument and poetry electric, which guarantee the futurities of the Ursprung, of the seminal font and donation of possible, unfolding meanings. They make of Heraclitus—whom Heidegger translates, with a characteristic violence, into “lightning” and the “in-gathering of Being”—a thinker yet to come. (p. 203). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

The radical break with the western historical past would be that of ephemerality. It would entail the deliberate acceptance of the momentary and the transient. There would be no avowed aspirations to immortality. These would be left to French Academicians. Lines of verse claiming to outlast bronze would be entombed in the archives. Citation would become an esoteric practice and arrogance. (p. 216). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

On the horizon lies the prospect that biochemical, neurological discoveries will demonstrate that the inventive, cognitive processes of the human psyche have their ultimately material source. That even the greatest metaphysical conjecture or poetic find are complex forms of molecular chemistry. (p. 216). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

The point I have been trying to clarify is simple: literature and philosophy as we have known them are products of language. Unalterably that is the common ontological and substantive ground. Thought in poetry, the poetics of thought are deeds of grammar, of language in motion. Their means, their constraints are those of style. The unspeakable, in the direct sense of that word, circumscribes both. Poetry aims to reinvent language, to make it new. Philosophy labors to make language rigorously transparent, to purge it of ambiguity and confusion. (p. 214). New Directions. Edición de Kindle.

Matthew says

The last paragraphs:

"The radical break with the western historical past would be that of ephemerality. It would entail the deliberate acceptance of the momentary and the transient. There would be no avowed aspirations to immortality. These would be left to the French Academicians. Lines of verse claiming to outlast bronze would be entombed in the archives. Citation would become an esoteric practice and arrogance. The self-destruct, the effacing sweep of death would not only be accepted but somehow enfolded within aesthetic and intellectual phenomena. Sense would be made play: homo ludens. Thus semantics would converge with those mutations in the status of death and personal identity to which I have referred. On the horizon lies the prospect that biochemical, neurological discoveries will demonstrate that the inventive, cognitive processes of the human psyche have their ultimately material source. That even the greatest metaphysical conjecture or poetic find are complex forms of molecular chemistry.

"This is not a vision in which an obsolescent, often technophobic consciousness such as mine can take comfort. It comes after "the humanities" which so bleakly failed us in the long night of the twentieth century. Yet it may be a formidable adventure. And somewhere a rebellious singer, a philosophical inebriate with solitude will say "No." A syllable charged with the promise of creation."
