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Steiner's Shoah: A Conversation in Silence

Catherine D. Chatterley

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

History

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at
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ABSTRACT

Steiner's Shoah: A Conversation in Silence

Catherine D. Chatterley

George Steiner is one of the most outstanding contemporary international literary critics and linguistic philosophers, whose imposing *oeuvre* speaks to a myriad of subjects from literary history to postmodernism to philological dialectics. A less noticed, but equally powerful, aspect of Steiner's ongoing concerns is his approach to the Holocaust. Troubled by the directions taken by language, culture, and humanity in the twentieth century, Steiner sees the Nazi extermination of European Jewry as the key point of rupture not only in modern German or European, but in all preceding human, history. It is through the Holocaust, that not only Germans or bystanders, but we as a species, enter into barbarism.

This study explores George Steiner's approach to the historical and literary representation of the Shoah. Steiner's conception of human language as a vibrant living organism, the prime carrier of both civilization and its opposite – nihilism, is foundational to his thought on Holocaust representation and, therefore, forms the spine of this thesis. Initially calling for silence in relation to the Shoah, Steiner has modified his conception of "silence" now to act as a metaphor, warning against the use of ordinary linguistic techniques when speaking or writing about the *tremendum*, the Holocaust. He argues that much of what is produced on the subject of the Holocaust is inadequate, even harmful in its tendency to add a kind of *acceptability* to the phenomenon by reducing and reproducing it within normal, articulate, acceptable language. Based on his own controversial theory of the causes of antisemitism in Western culture, "the blackmail of transcendence", Steiner argues that the only language into which the essential Shoah experience can be translated is theological.

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For my mother, Barbara,
a constant source of love and support

And to George Steiner,
for passionate eloquence and outraged integrity

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CHAPTER ONE

“A Kind of Survivor” – Introducing George Steiner

What makes men of genius, or rather what they make, is not new ideas; it is that idea – possessing them – that what has been said has still not been said enough.

Eugène Delacroix

George Steiner is one the most outstanding contemporary international literary critics and linguistic philosophers, whose imposing *oeuvre* speaks to a myriad of subjects from literary history to postmodernism to philological dialectics. An internationally renowned expert in the study of Western literature and human language, George Steiner has pushed the limits and blurred the boundaries of traditional literary criticism. Steiner's work, reflecting larger humanitarian concerns, resists containment within the strict parameters of textual criticism. He is, at once, a writer, linguist, literary critic, cultural commentator, philosopher, ethicist, historian of literature and ideas, and theological dilettante. Each aspect of Steiner's identity is filtered through his profound sensitivity to language and his striking ability for eloquence. Steiner's mastery of four European languages (French, German, English, and Italian, in addition to Greek and Latin), of the complex field of language studies (literary theory and modern linguistics), and of the Western literary-philosophical “canon”, guarantees him the title “polymath” and places him in an elite circle of international scholars.

Every area of Steiner's intellectual work is concerned with Western

culture, both its grand heights *and* its dark paths, particularly the “twisted road to Auschwitz”. His scholarship, regardless of the subject, is informed by an ethical seriousness and humane morality, which is itself consciously rooted in the “radical humanism” of the Central European Jewish intellectual tradition. Primarily concerned with the two subjects of human language and culture, Steiner’s work is founded on their symbiosis. The Word, as the basis of Western culture, is for him implicated in any failure or regressive tendency of Western civilization. And the event, which for Steiner has incriminated language, and, through it, Western culture, is above all this century’s mass murder of European Jewry. A less noticed, but equally powerful, aspect of Steiner’s ongoing concerns is his work on the Shoah, in which he adamantly argues that any examination or assessment of culture after World War II must address the Catastrophe at its very centre.

George Steiner’s mother, Elsie Franzos, was born into a prominent Jewish Viennese family. Her great uncle was a well-known writer, and she was raised in a multilingual, intellectual, bourgeois atmosphere. Frederick George Steiner, who was born in a village outside Lidice, Czechoslovakia, moved with his family to Austria when he was a child. Frederick wrote several books in economic history and then became an international banker and businessman,

“very largely so that his son could become a scholar.”¹ The couple left Vienna for Paris, in 1924, at Frederick’s decision and to Elsie’s dismay. George Steiner was born on 23 April 1929 in Paris, France, into a home filled to capacity with books, music, and other accoutrements of European culture. “My mama [began] a sentence in one language and [finished] it in several others, almost unaware, so I was completely trilingual from birth. My father [began] reading Homer with me before I went to school, [began] teaching me the classics under the mounting and terrible shadow of Hitler.”²

Steiner was eleven years old when his family suddenly emigrated to the United States, in 1940. That year, his father Frederick was in New York City on business, at a luncheon at the Wall Street Club, when he ran into an old friend who was now the head of Siemens, the German electrical company. The man approached Frederick in the bathroom, telling him, “You better listen to me whether you like it or not. I can give you no details, I don’t know any. We’re coming into France very soon. Get your family out at any price.”³ Frederick took the man’s comments seriously, and immediately requested that his family join him in America, due to “prolonged business negotiations”. Elsie and her son came out of France on one of the last American boats.⁴

¹George Steiner, “George Steiner Interviewed by Eleanor Wachtel,” interview by Eleanor Wachtel, *Queen’s Quarterly*, no. 4 (Winter 1992), 837-848: 841.

²George Steiner, “George Steiner: The Art of Criticism II,” interview by Ronald A. Sharp, *The Paris Review*, no. 137 (1995), 42-102: 62.

³*Ibid.*, 63.

⁴*Ibid.*, 64.

Steiner attended private school – the Horace Mann School – in New York City for two years before being transferred to the city’s French lycée. Steiner wanted to return to France to attend university; however, Frederick forced him to study in America, as he believed English was to be the language of the future. After spending an “orientation week” at Yale, in 1948, Steiner read a *Time* magazine article about the University of Chicago and its chancellor, Robert Maynard Hutchins, and decided to enroll at the latter. Steiner had been told by a classmate how tough the exclusive Yale environment was on its Jewish students, and Chicago allowed students to study at their own speed. After receiving his B.A. in one year (he had passed ten out of fourteen final exams, written upon arrival), Steiner applied to continue his studies in science. His graduate advisor refused to admit him, stating that he had not demonstrated an understanding of mathematical processes.⁵ Harvard University contacted Steiner, through one of his professors, about attending their comparative literature program. Impressed by Harvard’s reputation, Steiner left Chicago and received his M.A. in 1950. He describes this time, in “the icy academic atmosphere” of Harvard, as one of the darkest periods of his life.⁶ He moved on to Oxford, as a Rhodes Scholar, graduating in 1955 with a D.Phil. in English Literature. On July 7 of that year he married Zara Alice Shakow, the distinguished diplomatic historian. They have two children, David Milton and Deborah Tarn, both academics and teaching at American universities.

⁵Ibid., 66.

⁶Ibid., 67.

Steiner is the recipient of countless awards and honours (Rhodes Scholarship, 1955, Fulbright Professorship, 1958-59, Guggenheim Fellowship, 1971-72), and was named *Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur* by France (1984). He holds membership in numerous learned associations and clubs, and has been a visiting professor at New York University, the University of California, and Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford universities. Steiner was named Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge, in 1969, and still holds this lifelong appointment. Ironically, Steiner is the first occupant of the Lord Weidenfeld Professorship of Comparative Literature at Oxford -- a subject Oxford refused to teach when Steiner was in attendance.⁷ He has taught English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva, in Switzerland, from 1974 until his recent retirement in 1995. He still continues brief teaching stints at Geneva and, recently, in Italy at the University of Siena.

George Steiner is a prolific writer. He has written sustained studies on such topics as criticism, tragedy, mythology, translation, language and culture, Martin Heidegger, the philosophy of art, and chess, in addition to editing three works.⁸ He has published three independent collections -- two containing his

⁷At Oxford University, the first version of Steiner's English dissertation was rejected for its comparative nature. See Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 44.

⁸George Steiner and Robert Fagles, eds. *Homer: A Collection of Critical Essays*. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1962). George Steiner, ed. *The Penguin Book of Modern Verse Translation*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1966), reprinted as *Poem into Poem: World Poetry in Modern Verse Translation*, 1970. George Steiner, ed. *Homer in English*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

most important essays⁹ and one collection of his fictional work.¹⁰ Steiner has produced three works of fiction: *Anno Domini* (1964), *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* (1979), and *Proofs and Three Parables* (1993). He has also worked on the editorial staff of *The Economist* and was the principal literary critic for *The New Yorker*.¹¹

As “a kind of survivor”, Steiner regards his way of being in the world, as he does his way of being a Jew, as indivisible from “the black mystery of what happened in Europe.”¹² Steiner sees it as an accident of luck that he and his family escaped Europe in those last days. There is a feeling, on Steiner’s part, of connection to other Jews through the experience of the Holocaust. “All of us obviously have something in common. We do tend to recognize one another wherever we meet, nearly at a glance, by some common trick of feeling, by the darkness we carry.”¹³ Steiner is a complicated character – an independent thinker and a free agent. While he is on one level very aware of his Jewish identity – he claims inheritance of the grand intellectual tradition of assimilated central-European Jewry – Steiner recognizes his isolation from the

⁹George Steiner, *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984). George Steiner, *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁰George Steiner, *The Deeps of the Sea and Other Fiction*. (New York: Faber and Faber, 1996).

¹¹Steiner also reviews major books for the *Times Literary Supplement* while regularly contributing to an array of periodicals including *Commentary*, *Harper’s Magazine*, *The Nation*, and *Salmagundi*.

¹²George Steiner, “A Kind of Survivor” in *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 220.

¹³*Ibid.*, 221.

Jewish world, as he sees it primarily composed of Orthodox-religious Jews, Israelis and Zionists, and “conservative” American Jews. His Jewish heritage, that of central Europe, was annihilated between two waves of murder, Nazism and Stalinism, and so Steiner -- its “representative” and cultural heir -- is alone in the world.

Steiner’s father taught him about uncertainty, always saying, “this is totally temporary, Hitler is coming, we have our bags packed; you’re going to learn a lot of languages, so that when we start moving you can study and earn a living.”¹⁴ Since his childhood, after leaving France, Steiner has never invested any love or trust in a place:

I invest in time, yes, but that’s something quite different. The Jewish passport is not a passport of place. I collect passports, by the way, as others do stamps, simply because God knows when they might come in handy. One never knows. And a Jewish passport is a passport in time, in history, in his identity or her identity as a human being in a tradition of study and survival. I much prefer time to space.¹⁵

Steiner abhors nationalism in all of its forms. The Jew, for Steiner, has an important, exemplary role to play in the world: “To show that whereas trees have roots, men have legs and are each other’s guests.”¹⁶ The State of Israel stands in direct contradiction to the picture Steiner paints of the noble “Wandering Jew”. Born out of the destruction in Europe, according to Steiner, Israel demands a large degree of chauvinism on the part of its inhabitants in

¹⁴Steiner, “Interviewed,” *Queen’s Quarterly*, 840.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 848.

¹⁶Steiner, “Kind of Survivor,” *Reader*, 232.

order to simply survive:

But although the strength of Israel reaches deep into the awareness of every Jew, though the survival of the Jewish people may depend on it, the nation-state bristling with arms is a bitter relic, an absurdity in the century of crowded men. And it is alien to some of the most radical, most humane elements in the Jewish spirit.¹⁷

The fact that Jews “have to become torturers” in order to survive is something Steiner cannot accept or support. “We were the people who because of our helplessness, because we were hunted, had the fantastic privilege and aristocracy of not torturing anybody else, of not making others homeless.”¹⁸

It would seem reasonable for Steiner, as it was for many other survivors, to have wanted to move away from Europe with a feeling of relief, of having left behind a massive cemetery. Yet he still resides in Europe, shuttling between Cambridge, Paris, and Geneva. Steiner feels a responsibility, or obligation, to write and teach in Europe for two main reasons. First, he refuses to be driven out of his home, for the second time, thereby contributing to Hitler's design of a *Judenrein* Europe. And secondly, he feels compelled to honour and attempt to continue the European Jewish culture that once flourished:

I am a rememberancer. At the centre of my work is an attempt to come *after* the Shoah, culturally, philosophically, in a literary sense: to be somewhere around with all the shadows and the ghosts and the ash, which are so enormous here....There should be a few impractical Jews left in the great shadow world of

¹⁷Ibid., 223. For a discussion of George Steiner's commentary on the state of Israel and Zionism, see Frederick Krantz, “George Steiner's Negative Midrash on Israel and Zionism: A Critique,” *Zionist Ideas* 17 (1988), 22-77.

¹⁸Steiner, “Art,” *The Paris Review*, 72.

Europe who at least remember what the civilization here was.¹⁹

Steiner has no deep affinity for any particular country, but does consider himself “European”. He is increasingly aware that what he responds to so strongly in this culture is of its past time -- a lost Europe. However, the continent is still the only place which allows him to live in four languages, a crucial condition central to his work. Steiner’s interest in language is, then, not surprising, as it is a transportable resource, accessible to all, offering the possibility of cultural expression -- suitable for a man “without a home”.²⁰

Steiner’s self-definition presents him with a momentous challenge. The impressive line of assimilated Jewish intellectuals of Central European ancestry he claims to represent -- Marx, Freud, Einstein, Schoenberg, Kafka, Wittgenstein, Heine, Hofmannsthal, Walter Benjamin, Proust, Lévi-Strauss, Ernst Bloch, T.W. Adorno, Hannah Arendt -- is intimidating company. But, for Steiner, their thought-world is his home. He claims to have secured his sense of vocation from this esteemed group of thinkers and what he terms their common practice of “radical humanism”. Theodore Solotaroff, in his review of Steiner’s book, *Language and Silence*, describes the implications of Steiner’s identification with this “pantheon of modern genius”:

It means to master the languages and literatures which extend from Budapest to Paris, to grasp the range of intellectual achievements that run from Cantor’s mathematics to Lukács’ Marxism. It also means to take upon oneself the restatement and

¹⁹Ibid., 72-73.

²⁰For Steiner’s discussion of the historical Jewish struggle between Text (Language) and Land, see Steiner, “Our Homeland, the Text,” in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

reliving of 'an inheritance of humane striving, already done to death.' Finally, it means to Steiner, I think, to stand in a deep sense for the whole generation of his peers -- these children who did not survive, who left this great tradition bereft of its natural protégés, who make such a haunting absence today in the life of the European mind.²¹

Steiner feels a certain responsibility to continue this cultural tradition, reduced to ash during the Shoah, through his own writing and teaching:

That which has been destroyed -- the large mass of life so mocked, so hounded to oblivion that even the names are gone and the prayer for the dead can give no exact foothold -- embodied a particular genius, a quality of intelligence and feeling which none of the major Jewish communities now surviving has preserved or recaptured. Because I feel that specific inheritance urgent in my own reflexes, in the work I try to do, I am a kind of survivor.²²

For Steiner, this group's prestige and authenticity is augmented by its creatively committed, and ultimately tragic, experience in the world.

Steiner's critics, and there are many, have argued that his identification with this long line of prestigious thinkers is more an act of imagination and stubborn will than of any legitimate intellectual ancestry. A frequent complaint among reviewers of his work is that he is extremely melodramatic, grandiose, theatrical, and even sensationalist.²³ Similarly, his obsession with the Holocaust and its implications for our culture has been interpreted by some as "a love of

²¹Theodore Solotaroff, review of *Language and Silence*, by George Steiner, in *The New Republic* (May 13/67), 21-24: 21-22.

²²Steiner, "Kind of Survivor," *Reader*, 225.

²³*Critical Survey of Literary Theory*, (1987), s.v. "George Steiner."

the abyss".²⁴ Frank Kermode has referred to Steiner as a "moral terrorist" -- "Kant's term for 'his contemporaries whose view of history was colored by the belief that they lived in a period when the world was so far gone in decadence that universal catastrophe was at hand.'"²⁵ In the end, though, most critics, including Kermode, yield to an appreciation of Steiner's sincerity and powerful intellect.

Some scholars have more serious criticisms. Robert Alter argues that Steiner replaces an instructive analysis with a rhetoric of authority. Abstractions abound and his prose is "complicated by Latinate terms that are either intrinsically recondite or at least distanced from common usage through the odd suffix...."²⁶ Most of his critics, especially those in England, resent what they see as the pompous and pretentious tone of many of his essays. Some scholars even seem resentful of the multilingual breadth of his reading. In a review of Steiner's *In Bluebeard's Castle*, an English critic sums up the general feeling of most of his detractors:

Those trained in tougher disciplines, who know a contradiction when they see one, may smile tolerantly at the spectacle of a literary critic who has waded into deep waters and is patently out of his depth. But it takes some courage, some determination, to go into the water at all.²⁷

²⁴ibid.

²⁵ibid.

²⁶Robert Alter, "Against Messiness," review of *No Passion Spent* and *The Deeps of the Sea and Other Fiction*, by George Steiner, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 12 January 1996, 23.

²⁷"The Poetics of Cultural Criticism," *The Times Literary Supplement*, 17 December 1971, 1565-66: 1565.

Here Steiner is being punished for his aspiration “to be something radically un-English...namely, the kind of writer for whom criticism is not distinguished from the pursuit of ideas and confident high-level speculation about the state of the world.”²⁸ Indeed, Steiner does believe that critics should work “outward from the particular literary instance to the far reaches of moral and political argument.”²⁹ For him, language, literature, and culture are entwined with one another -- it is not possible to speak of one of them in total isolation from the others. Steiner’s work straddles the historical and cultural boundaries of the West and its intellectual categories and learned disciplines. His targeted audience is not the academic specialist, but the educated general reader -- a person who, Steiner realizes, is becoming increasingly hard to find.

Steiner has been most influenced by critics of high moral and philosophical seriousness: Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Edmund Wilson, and F.R. Leavis.³⁰ The work of many “radical humanists” -- Hannah Arendt, Ernst Bloch, T.W. Adorno, Erich Kahler, and Claude Lévi-Strauss in particular -- throws light on what would eventually emerge as Steiner’s dominant concern -- the place and meaning of mass murder in “enlightened” Western culture:

Yet it is these voices which seem to me contemporary, whose work and context of reference are indispensable to an understanding of the philosophic, political, aesthetic roots of the inhuman; of the paradox that modern barbarism sprang in some

²⁸Ibid., 1566.

²⁹*Critical Survey*, (1987), s.v. “George Steiner.”

³⁰Ibid.

intimate, perhaps necessary way, from the very core and locale of humanistic civilization.³¹

Steiner's persona is paradoxical. He is at once a prime representative and champion of Western culture and its foundational thought, and one of its loudest and most persistent critics; a defender and proponent of humane literacy, constantly bemoaning our dangerously illiterate state, and at the same time unable confidently to affirm that the humanities humanize. He is profoundly disillusioned by the fact, now well known through the memoirs of Rudolf Höss, the commandant of Auschwitz, that "a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning."³² To go on teaching and writing without acknowledging the fact that high culture and barbarism have co-existed is, for Steiner, at the least irresponsible, and more likely, reprehensible. And yet the problem is not simply the co-existence of good and evil, but the terrifying possibility of their collusion and collaboration:

...It is at least conceivable that the focusing of consciousness on a written text which is the substance of our training and pursuit diminishes the sharpness and readiness of our actual moral response....The capacity for imaginative reflex, for moral risk in any human being is not limitless; on the contrary, it can be rapidly absorbed by fictions, and thus the cry in the poem may come to sound louder, more urgent, more real than the cry in the street outside....Thus there may be a covert, betraying link between the cultivation of aesthetic response and the potential of personal inhumanity. What then are we doing

³¹Steiner, "Kind of Survivor," *Reader*, 229.

³²*Dictionary of Literary Biography*, v .67, (1988), s.v. "George Steiner."

when we study and teach literature?³³

According to Steiner, the Shoah signifies both the failure of Western humanistic culture, and the disintegration of human language on which this same culture has traditionally been based. The central role played by Jewish intellectuals in the creation and celebration of Western culture is counterpoised, in a tragic way, to the antisemitic foundation of this same Christian European culture in the West. Steiner reinforces this point:

Men are accomplices to that which leaves them indifferent. It is this fact which must, I think, make the Jew wary inside western culture, which must lead him to re-examine ideals and historical traditions that, certainly in Europe, had enlisted the best of his hopes and genius. The house of civilization proved no shelter.³⁴

Steiner offers one, albeit hesitant, explanation of the collaboration between inhumanity and high culture. The increased secularity of Western culture, separated from former theological constraints and obligations, has created a morally irresponsible, anarchic, and nihilistic populace. And the “death of God” also releases all previous restraints on scientific inquiry. This, in turn, disables our humanity by encouraging our need for “speculative abstraction, for aesthetic formalism, for disinterested inquiry [which is] immune to the roughage of common needs and pursuits....”³⁵

Critics attack Steiner for his ambivalent attitude toward humanistic

³³George Steiner, “To Civilize Our Gentlemen” in *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 30-31.

³⁴Steiner, “Kind of Survivor,” *Reader*, 230.

³⁵George Steiner, “Remembering the Future,” *Theology* 93 (November/December 1990), 439.

culture. They have accused him of repeating his accusations against Western culture without providing any sound analysis of the problem. A critic for *The Times Literary Supplement*, in response to Steiner's discussion of the collusion between high culture and Nazi butchery in his book, *In Bluebeard's Castle*, states:

It is surely time that Dr. Steiner became more explicit about this cultural demonology, and provided names and case histories. There are facts that the mind can do nothing with, and this seems to be one of them: by itself it offers neither condemnation nor vindication of Western liberal culture.³⁶

But Steiner's purpose is not to provide the answer to this immensely difficult dilemma -- he admits that he has no answers, only suggestions, and further queries -- but to continue reminding us of this important problem and provoking our discussion of it. Arguably, just as Steiner contends that the Jews (through their creation of monotheism, Jesus Christ, and Marxism) are historically the "conscience of humanity", reminding us of a higher moral order, so he himself acts as our collective conscience, telling anyone who will listen that there is a systemic problem at the base of Western civilization. It is to his credit, as a person and as a scholar, that he never ceases to be astonished by the fact, "naive as it seems to people, that you can use human speech to both bless, to love, to build, to forgive and also, to torture, to hate, to destroy and to annihilate."³⁷

³⁶ "Poetics," *Times Literary Supplement* (TLS), 17 December 1971, 1566.

³⁷ *Contemporary Authors*, v. 31, (1990), s.v. "Steiner".

CHAPTER TWO

Language and Humanity: A Theory of Co-Dependency

Language is only the instrument of science and words are but the signs of ideas: I wish, however, that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.

Samuel Johnson

To understand George Steiner's thought on the Shoah and its representation, one must first comprehend his theory of language. George Steiner is a scholar of language and literature who has developed his own unique approach to the meaning and role of language in human culture. Language, for Steiner, as a kind of living entity, is the primary determinant of our humanity. Steiner has investigated the degenerative effects of bestiality upon language and humanity, precipitated by what he considers to be their deadly struggle with the horrific inhumanity of Nazism. As a result of this examination, Steiner argues that just as language is the prime carrier of civilization and of our collective humanity, it can also be demonically manipulated by a powerful, hateful entity to perpetrate the most heinous crimes against humanity.

In The Gospel According to John, the apostle tells us, "In the beginning was the Word."³⁸ Steiner reminds us that Western civilization owes its essentially verbal character both to the Greco-Judaic tradition, and to the Hellenistic conception of the *Logos*. "We take this character for granted. It is

³⁸John 1: 1.

the root and bark of our experience and we cannot readily transpose our imaginings outside it. We live inside the act of discourse.”³⁹ The primacy of the word was adopted by Christianity from its parental traditions -- Judaism and Greco-Roman culture. Historically, the Jewish people, known as the “people of the Book”, have had the *Torah* as their centre of existence and communal identity. In his essay, “Our Homeland, the Text”, Steiner writes:

The Torah is the pivot of the weave and cross-weave of reference, elucidation, hermeneutic debate which organize, which inform organically, the daily and the historical life of the community. The community can be defined as a concentric tradition of reading...writing has been the indestructible guarantor, the ‘underwriter’, of the identity of the Jew: across the frontiers of his harrying, across the centuries, across the languages of which he has been a forced borrower and frequent master. Like a snail, his antennae towards menace, the Jew has carried the house of the text on his back. What other domicile has been allowed him?⁴⁰

In Christian Europe, the result, as it were, of an uneasy marriage between Jewish and Greco-Roman parents, language was to become the house of order in which the inhabitants of reality and experience dwelt:

Literature, philosophy, theology, law, the arts of history, are endeavors to enclose within the bounds of rational discourse the sum of human experience, its recorded past, its present condition and future expectations. The code of Justinian, the *Summa* of Aquinas, the world chronicles of medieval literature, the *Divina Commedia*, are attempts at total containment. They bear solemn witness to the belief that all truth and realness -- with the exception of a small, queer margin at the very top -- can be

³⁹George Steiner, “The Retreat from the Word,” *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 283.

⁴⁰Steiner, “Homeland,” *No Passion Spent*, 308-309.

housed inside the walls of language.⁴¹

According to Steiner, the seventeenth-century development of modern mathematics brought momentous change to this European conception of language and its ability to convey reality. Gradually, the European confidence in the ability of language to express the gamut of human experience withdrew in the face of mathematical exactitude and predictability. Increasingly, the languages of words and of mathematics grew apart, until it became impossible for a scholar to continue to feel at home in both mathematical and humanistic culture. "By virtue of mathematics, the stars move out of mythology into the astronomer's table. And as mathematics settles into the marrow of a science, the concepts of that science, its habits of invention and understanding, become steadily less reducible to those of common language."⁴² Steiner argues that, in the nineteenth century, the "social sciences" -- sociology, history, economics -- became haunted by this scientific mirage of precise calculation and, as a result, began to imitate both mathematical methods of inquiry and claims of scientific certainty.

In his essay, "The Language Animal", Steiner describes what he refers to as a "language revolution". This revolution took place in Central Europe at the turn of this century. Developments in linguistics, symbolic logic, and mathematical philosophy combined to redefine the role and meaning of

⁴¹Steiner, "Retreat," *Reader*, 284.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 286.

language in humanity and culture.⁴³ Several years later, the period of total war between 1914-1918 and the death and destruction which it unleashed led Europe into crisis. The firmly established morals and values of European civilization were shaken by the unprecedented level of killing and devastation during the First World War. Steiner argues that this crisis situation precipitated a new examination of language, a new attempt to locate a semantic centre. Philosophers, poets, and critics now realized that humanism, "as it had energized European consciousness since the Renaissance, was in a process of collapse. Karl Kraus's premonition of new dark ages, Kafka's eerily exact prevision of the Holocaust, spring from an acute diagnosis of the breakdown of liberal humanism."⁴⁴ Steiner argues that because language was the medium of humane literacy and learning, it was understood as the root of the present crisis. "In the hollowness and death of the word, Mauthner, Wittgenstein, and Broch observed the malady of a whole civilization."⁴⁵

Steiner argues that today, through the influence of poor education, consumer advertising and modern media, literacy has declined to an abysmally

⁴³ George Steiner, "The Language Animal" in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution*. (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 71.

⁴⁴Steiner, "Language Animal," *Extraterritorial*, 73.

According to Steiner, this secular humanism is marked by immeasurable contributions made by Jews to Western culture between 1830 and 1930. The *Central European Humanists* Steiner refers to were a Jewish elite surrounded by a wider middle-class circle who shared many characteristic habits and traits. They were schooled in the Greek and Latin classics; were multi-lingual; were devoted readers of Goethe, Schiller, and Lessing; welcomed new, modern art forms such as realism in literature and Impressionism in the fine arts; and contributed disproportionately to the intellectual fabric *deeply* of Western culture. Through the work of Marx, Freud, and Einstein alone, this tradition continues to affect our lives. See Steiner, "Kind of Survivor," *Reader*, 226-228.

⁴⁵ibid.

low state. Language no longer claims to represent reality or most aspects of human experience. "The writer of today tends to use far fewer and simpler words, both because mass culture has watered down the concept of literacy and because the sum of realities of which words can give a necessary and sufficient account has sharply diminished."⁴⁶Steiner attributes this failure of learning, and the low intellectual standards which accompany it, to the democratic tradition and the subsequent levelling of culture he believes is inherent in pluralistic populism. "Surely there can be no doubt that the access to economic and political power of the semi-educated has brought with it a drastic reduction in the wealth and dignity of speech."⁴⁷

The implications of our present language crisis are, for Steiner, deeply troubling:

Much of the best that we have known of man, much of that which relates the human to the humane -- and our future turns on that equation -- has been immediately related to the miracle of speech. Humanity and that miracle are, or have been hitherto, indivisible. Should language lose an appreciable measure of its dynamism, man will, in some radical way, be less man, less himself. Recent history and the breakdown of effective communication between enemies and generations, as it harries us now, shows what this diminution of humanity is like. There was a loud organic and animal world before man, a world full of non-human messages. There can be such a world after him.⁴⁸

Steiner argues that it is our ability to create language which determines our humanity. "In short, the least inadequate definition we can arrive at of the

⁴⁶Steiner, "Retreat," *Reader*, 295.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 296.

⁴⁸Steiner, "Language Animal," *Extraterritorial*, 101.

genus *homo*, the definition that fully distinguishes him from all neighbouring life-forms, is this: man is a *zoon phonanta*, a language-animal. And there is no other like him."⁴⁹ Hence, the study of human language and its origin is, in Steiner's thinking, an investigation into the very origins of human existence.

In addition to the foundation of his vocation as at once critic and legate of Western literature and liberal culture, George Steiner is a linguist – a scholar of the science of language. For Steiner, languages are living organisms which carry within them a life force. And so, languages may adapt and grow, but, similarly, they are also vulnerable to decay and eventual death.⁵⁰

A language shows that it has in it the germ of dissolution in several ways. Actions of the mind that were once spontaneous become mechanical, frozen habits (dead metaphors, stock similes, slogans). Words grow longer and more ambiguous. Instead of style, there is rhetoric. Instead of precise common usage, there is jargon....All these technical failures accumulate to the essential failure: the language no longer sharpens thought but blurs it. Instead of charging every expression with the greatest available energy and directness, it loosens and disperses the intensity of feeling....In short, the language is no longer lived; it is merely spoken.⁵¹

Steiner understands communication to be the central function of human language. He realizes that both good and evil can be communicated through the prism of language, the choice being totally dependent on the agenda of the speaker. Steiner has argued that under the pressure of political

⁴⁹Ibid., 65.

⁵⁰George Steiner, "The Hollow Miracle" in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 208.

⁵¹Ibid.

inhumanity and its inevitable falsehoods, words can lose their humane meaning. Steiner attributes what he considers to be the present “deadness of spirit” in the German language to the influence of twelve years of murderous Nazi expression:

Languages have great reserves of life. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy and cheapness.... But there comes a breaking point. Use a language to conceive, organize, and justify Belsen; use it to make out specifications for gas ovens; use it to dehumanize man during twelve years of calculated bestiality. Something will happen to it. Make words of what Hitler and Goebbels and the hundred thousand *Untersturmführer* made: conveyers of terror and falsehood. Something will happen to the words. Something of the lies and sadism will settle in the marrow of the language. Imperceptibly at first, like the poisons of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, and the deep-set destruction. The language will no longer grow and freshen. It will no longer perform, quite as well as it used to, its two principle functions: the conveyance of humane order which we call law, and the communication of the quick of the human spirit which we call grace.⁵²

At the same time, however, Steiner attributes philosophic and aesthetic creation of the highest rank to human experience expressed inside systems of inequality and repression, which he counter-poses to Western democratic societies. In fact, he argues that the finest contemporary writers are those of Soviet⁵³ and Latin American extraction. Steiner realizes the implications of

⁵²Ibid, 213. The poetry of Paul Celan struggled to free itself from this dehumanized tongue so that a re-conditioned post-Holocaust German could be used to express his own Jewish reality. Steiner's celebration of Celan's work will be addressed in Chapter Three of this paper.

⁵³Steiner argues that the lineage of genius in Russian poetry, drama, fiction, and literary theory is unbroken from the revolutionary period until the present day. Russian literature has developed as a clandestine response to official repression. The specific writers whom Steiner celebrates run from Mandelstam, Akhmatova, Pasternak and Brodsky to the fiction of Siniavsky, Zinoviev, and Solzhenitsyn. See George Steiner, “The Archives of Eden,” in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 299.

such an argument:

the price exacted in order to provide the context of peril and subversion which seems to generate certain summits of mind and imagination *may* [italics mine], socially, humanely, already have been too steep. How many slaves for one Plato, how many in abjection for one Pushkin or Mandelstam? There are no facile balance sheets. But the possibility that there are organic affinities between inequality and *poiesis*, between constraint and depth of shaping, is a real one. 'Censorship is the mother of metaphor' (Borges).⁵⁴

Steiner does not address the Holocaust within the context of his theory on creativity. One can confidently assume that Steiner would not apply this theory to the Holocaust. He argues that there are 'degrees' of repression which allow for, and perhaps encourage, creative resistance on the part of artists. The Shoah, however, is not "simply" an example of official repression, but of state-sponsored extermination.

According to Steiner, the English language is also under attack, albeit less dramatically than German, by the mass media and advertising in England and North America. The effects on English are also destructive and dangerous - - precise meaning is no longer discernable, or seemingly desired, by the public. Language is in decay as it is increasingly used to misconstrue and to deceive, rather than clearly to articulate and to enlighten. Steiner illustrates this point by stating that "The language of a community has reached a perilous state when a

⁵⁴George Steiner, "A Responion" in *Reading George Steiner*, Nathan A. Scott, Jr. And Ronald A. Sharp, eds. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 285. It would seem that Steiner has over-exaggerated the importance of aesthetic creation and inverted the relationship between human beings and their creative pursuits. Certainly, art is meant to serve humanity and not the reverse.

study of radioactive fall-out can be entitled 'Operation Sunshine'.⁵⁵ As a solution to this crisis of communication, Steiner calls for the conscious re-
pristinization of language. He warns that if we do not restore some semblance
of linguistic meaning and clarity to our newspapers, to the law, and to our
politics, humanity will only drift further into chaos.⁵⁶ For Steiner, language is at
once a blessing which defines our humanity, and our greatest burden -- a
potentially spiralling abyss serving only to confound and alienate:

In actual speech all but a small class of definitional or
'unreflective response' sentences are surrounded, mutely
ramified, blurred by an immeasurably dense, individualized field
of intention and withholding. Scarcely anything in human speech
is what it sounds....Human speech conceals far more than it
confides; it blurs much more than it defines; it distances more
than it connects.⁵⁷

Recognizing that literature is a form, and function, of language, Steiner
the critic is concerned with producing a linguistically-educated literary
criticism. To this end, he has written extensively on the subjects of translation,
linguistic theory and its history, and the condition of language in our century.
Steiner supports an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language and
literature. He points to the work of the "Language Circles" which existed in

⁵⁵Steiner, "Retreat," *Reader*, 297.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 304.

⁵⁷George Steiner, "Creative Falsehood" in *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 408.

Leningrad, Moscow, and Prague, earlier this century⁵⁸, and argues that their study of style and genre in combination with poetics and literary composition is an invaluable example to the student of literature.⁵⁹ Steiner anticipates the beneficial results of future cooperation between academic disciplines for literature specialists:

If we allow 'linguistics' to include ancillary disciplines such as 'ethno-linguistics' or linguistic anthropology, 'social-linguistics' and the study of speech lesions and pathologies ('psycho-linguistics'), the extent of relevance to the history and criticism of literature becomes unmistakable.⁶⁰

Steiner's view of language as a living entity, itself influenced by human culture while it continually determines human reality, is the very foundation of his thought on Holocaust representation. For this reason, one must follow Steiner's intellectual excursion into linguistics, the science of language, in order to locate his position within the discipline. Steiner is primarily concerned with what he considers to be the two significant problems in the field of linguistics and their larger implications: the incredible diversity of human language, and the debate over the ability of language wholly to determine

⁵⁸The Moscow Linguistic Circle was founded by a group of students at Moscow University in 1915. One year later, in Petersburg, several young philologists and literary historians formed the Society for the Study of Poetic Language. The Prague Linguistic Circle held its first meeting in 1926 having become the new centre of linguistic study. These associations were responsible for the development of the first linguistic analysis of literature and, in particular, poetry. It was in these "Language Circles" that individuals such as Roman Jakobson, N.S. Trubetzkoy, and J. Mukarovski pioneered such fashionable concepts, today, as structuralism and semiology. See George Steiner, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 136-144.

⁵⁹George Steiner, "Whorf, Chomsky and the Student of Literature," *New Literary History* 4, no. 1 (Autumn 1972), 15-34: 31.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

human cognition and experience. The title of Steiner's *magnum opus*, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, refers to the Tower of Babel in biblical mythology. Chapter eleven of the Book of Genesis explains the diversity of human language as a divine punishment in response to humanity's attempt to challenge the supremacy of its Creator -- a limitation put upon humanity, forever, by God:

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded. And the Lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do. Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city. Therefore is the name of it called Babel; because the Lord did there confound the language of all the earth: and from thence did the Lord scatter them abroad upon the face of all the earth.⁶¹

Scholars of language have investigated the continuing "mystery of Babel" in order to determine the origins of human language. Many have attempted to trace the evolution of competing tongues back to one source: a common human language. The work of Noam Chomsky, for example, posits that the underlying structure of all languages is the same and, therefore, common to all. What he terms "deep structures" form the skeletal system of every language -- a universal generative grammatical pattern. According to Chomsky, an innate mental structure exists within human beings from which they generate an ability to communicate linguistically with themselves and others. If, as Chomsky argues, there is a basic system to all languages and, therefore, to all

⁶¹Genesis 11: 5-9.

human beings, one could assume that translation, or understanding, would be possible between tongues. It is on this issue, Steiner argues, that Chomsky's theory falls short of its promises:

So far, there has been little evidence forthcoming as to genuine 'formal universals' and next to none of any 'substantive' ones. The distinction between 'deep' and 'surface' structures involves a manifest *petitio principii*, and I can observe nothing but a drastic retreat or *non sequitur* in Chomsky's remark that the fact that all languages are cut to the same rule-constrained pattern does not imply 'that there must be some reasonable procedure for translating between them.' Surely, this is exactly what it must imply.⁶²

Steiner believes that, presently, the main task for linguistics is to account for the enormous variety and diversity of human languages. Chomsky's theory of an innate universal language structure seems to contradict our variegated linguistic reality. Given Chomsky's scheme of universal "deep structures", Steiner argues, we should expect a restricted, inter-related array of human languages. Instead, there are between four and five thousand tongues currently being spoken on earth, and several thousand more are known to have been spoken in the past.⁶³ Steiner admits that he is "unable to consider intellectually satisfactory or adequate to the truth any model or formula of human verbal behaviour that does not in some way account for this fantastic multiplicity."⁶⁴ Steiner and Chomsky differ further

⁶²George Steiner, "An Exact Art" in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 192-193.

⁶³Steiner, "Whorf," *New Literary History*, 15.

⁶⁴Steiner, "Tongues of Men," in *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution*. (New York: Atheneum, 1971), 122.

over the point of entry into the investigation of the origins of language. The issues of diversity and mutual incomprehensibility are primary and ontological for Steiner, who is especially concerned with the subject of translation, while Chomsky is dismissive of such “surface” concerns, and chooses to focus on what he believes to be the deeper universals of language.⁶⁵

Benjamin Lee Whorf’s theory of language follows the work of linguist Edward Sapir and draws upon the two disciplines of anthropology and linguistics to create a new category of inquiry -- “ethno-linguistics”.⁶⁶ According to Steiner, Whorf’s “meta-linguistics” represent the relativist position on the continuum of language studies. Focused on the relationship between language and perception, Whorf argues that as humans our experiences are determined by the culture which surrounds us and by the language we speak. Since thought is simply language internalized, our particular language conditions the form and content of our thinking and therefore determines the way we conceive and express our experiences.⁶⁷

Whorf argues that:

[a person's] thinking itself is in a language -- in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese. And every language is a vast pattern-system, differing from others, in which are culturally ordained the forms and categories by which the personality not only communicates, but also analyzes nature, notices or neglects types of relationship and

⁶⁵For a discussion of this debate, based on comments which Noam Chomsky made in private correspondence with George Steiner, see Steiner, “Tongues of Men,” *Extraterritorial*, 102-125.

⁶⁶See Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 88-94.

⁶⁷George Steiner, “Whorf,” *New Literary History*, 16.

phenomena, channels his reasoning, and builds the house of his consciousness.⁶⁸

There is no universal objective reality, but simply competing “thought-worlds” which are informed by each person’s native culture and language. If Whorf’s theory is correct, Steiner argues, human beings could not communicate across cultures, adopt additional languages, or translate between tongues -- all of which we know are possible.

While Steiner admits that both relativist and universalist approaches to language are problematic, he does acknowledge, as a writer and critic, an affinity for a Whorfian analysis. Students of literature, Steiner argues, will naturally be sympathetic to Whorf’s concern with cultural specificity and linguistic uniqueness:

Every writer of substance develops a ‘language world’ whose contours, tonality, and idiosyncracies we come to recognize. And each is susceptible of lexical and grammatical investigation. Where Whorf finds that every language and the culture which that language articulates organizes (makes organic) its particular ‘thought world,’ the reader of literature will say the same of every writer and, where penetrative response is pressed home, of every major poem, play, or novel.⁶⁹

The pressures of time (literary convention and social inferences), location (factors of class, gender, and race), and the author’s own personal style bear upon language and, therefore, upon literature, creating a matrix of specificity. Therefore, the perceptions held by literary scholars of language in literature are

⁶⁸Ibid., 20.

⁶⁹Ibid., 29.

relativist, or, as Steiner suggests, ultra-Whorfian.⁷⁰ Steiner's thought on Holocaust representation is also ultra-Whorfian in its focus on the specificity and the uniqueness of the Shoah experience. Whorf's notion that language is actually the defining framework for human experience, and not simply a benign reporting device, informs Steiner's argument that a new pure language is required to represent the truly horrific nature of the Shoah.

Steiner defines literature as "language in a condition of special use".⁷¹ Within this "condition of special use", "language...freed from a paramount responsibility to information...[as] its ontology or *raison d'être*, lie[s] outside immediate utility and/or verifiability."⁷² History, unlike literature, is not similarly freed, but is obliged to provide accurate information about the past. For historical writing to be accepted and seen as legitimate, a historical work must be based on documented evidence and, therefore, must also be verifiable.

Steiner's positive conception of history, of what it actually is rather than what it is not, is vague and can only be estimated from his few comments on the subject. History, it would seem, is a provisional and aesthetic pursuit -- one still related to literature. Steiner dismisses what he sees as the "positivist" assumptions -- objective analysis and the deduction of historical laws -- of the historical profession as "a gross borrowing from the sphere of the exact and

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 27.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 126.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 127-128.

mathematical sciences.”⁷³ Steiner argues that it is this attempt, on the part of historians, to gain legitimacy by adopting “scientific” practices, that is compromising the essentially literary nature of the discipline:

The ambitions of scientific rigour and prophecy have seduced much historical writing from its veritable nature, which is art. Much of what passes for history at present is scarcely literate....The illusion of science and the fashions of the academic tend to transform the young historian into a ferret gnawing at the minute fact or figure. He dwells in footnotes and writes monographs in as illiterate a style as possible to demonstrate the scientific bias of his craft.⁷⁴

Steiner argues that all literary style, regardless of its subject, has the potential and tendency for distortion. To illustrate his point he quotes the contemporary historian, C.V. Wedgwood, who concedes, “There is no literary style which may not at some point take away something from the ascertainable outline of truth, which it is the task of scholarship to excavate and re-establish.”⁷⁵ For Steiner, history, because it is housed within language, which is itself unable to convey clearly reality, remains a subjective and interpretive enterprise. However, the documentary work carried out by historians on the Holocaust is seen by Steiner to be legitimate, valuable and necessary:

They have investigated the opportunistic sources of Nazi racial theories; the long tradition of *petit-bourgeois* resentment against a seemingly aloof, prospering minority. They have pointed, rightly, to the psychological, symbolic links between the inflationary collapse and the historical associations of Jewry and the money-market. There have been penetrating studies of the imperfect,

⁷³Steiner, “Retreat,” *Reader*, 289.

⁷⁴*ibid.*

⁷⁵*ibid.*

perhaps over-hasty assimilation of secularized Jews into the gentile community, an assimilation which produced much of the intellectual genius of modern Europe but also, particularly in Germany, took on the guise of a complex love-hate. Social historians have shown how numerous were the signs of developing hysteria between the Dreyfus affair and the 'final solution'. It has been argued, cogently, that there is an ultimately rational, albeit murderous, motive behind Nazi and Stalinist anti-Semitism: an attempt to get rid of a minority whose inheritance and whose style of feeling make of it a natural milieu for opposition, for potential subversion.⁷⁶

In fact, Steiner believes that social scientists and, more importantly, historians have actively contributed to the memorialization of the Shoah:

By simple virtue of their publication of the documentary records of the death camps, of the massacres at large, of Jewish resistance, the historians of the Shoah have performed an absolutely essential act of truthful remembrance, of resurrection. Theirs has been the *kaddish* against lies -- and against that greatest lie, which is forgetting.⁷⁷

Nevertheless, while he acknowledges systematic documentary study of the "Final Solution" to be crucial for our understanding and remembrance of what happened to European Jewry, George Steiner argues that historians have failed to explain the sources of the Shoah in European culture, and have not illuminated the roots of the inhuman:

They have, quite markedly, failed to explain -- except on the rather trivial level of Hitler's private pathology -- the Nazi decision to press on with the "Final Solution" when even a brief suspension of the death transports, roundups, and extermination industry would have freed desperately needed resources for the defense and survival of the Reich. Nor do 'rationalistic' and immanently grounded explanations explain the continuation of

⁷⁶George Steiner, *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), 35.

⁷⁷George Steiner, "The Long Life of Metaphor: An Approach to the Shoah" in *Writing and the Holocaust*, Berel Lang, ed. (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1988), 161.

virulent Jew hatred in countries, in societies where there are virtually *no Jews left* (as in Poland, in Austria, in the Ukraine). The seeds of Auschwitz -- the Nazi sense of victory over the Jews as outweighing the ruin of Germany; Jew-hatred where only phantoms are left. These are the questions that demand an attempt at an answer. And it is that attempt which leads me to test a different order or framework of thought and speech.⁷⁸

Whether or not history, by its established nature, is in the position to conduct the kind of investigation that Steiner believes is necessary is a question of considerable import. Arguably, the topic at hand has passed out of the strict parameters and limitations of traditional historical practice, and into the areas of philosophy and of symbolic, psychological, and metaphysical-theological domains. The questions which Steiner asks provoke, in turn, other important questions: is it possible for the discipline of history, as it is currently defined and practiced, adequately to investigate profound questions of causation, intent and motivation on the part of society in a serious and conclusive manner? Does the Shoah, as Saul Friedländer suggests, present us with an exceptional situation which imposes new limits of both interpretation and representation upon the historian?⁷⁹ And, when addressing the subject of the Holocaust, what role does moral judgement play in the writing of history? Within this particular context, Jean-Fraçois Lyotard has argued that history becomes impossible in the face of the Shoah:

With Auschwitz, something new has happened in history (which can only be a sign and not a fact), which is that the facts, the testimonies which bore the traces of *here's* and *now's*, the

⁷⁸Ibid.

⁷⁹See Saul Friedländer, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 56.

documents which indicated the sense or senses of the facts, and the names, finally the possibility of various kinds of phrases whose conjunction makes reality, all this has been destroyed as much as possible. Is it up to the historian to take into account not only the damages, but also the wrong? Not only the reality, but also the meta-reality that is the destruction of reality?...Its name marks the confines wherein historical knowledge sees its competence impugned.⁸⁰

Similarly, Steiner argues that empirical, secular, historical studies are restricted, by their very nature, from analyzing the sources of antisemitic motivation in the deeper recesses of the Western religious psyche.

In a recent critique of Steiner's work, Robert Alter addresses Steiner's "fatalistic" and "determinist" understanding of Western history. He argues that Steiner views history as an unfolding teleology, as a master-narrative, which finally results in the mass murder of six million Jews:

This narrative appears to have been constructed retrospectively from the German mass murder of European Jewry that truly haunts Steiner and is at the heart of his writing. He draws a dark, bold line of historical concatenation from the story of the binding of Isaac, Golgotha and the Pauline Epistles to the gas chambers. Drastic determinism rules the realm of history as he sees it. Thus, the rejection of Jesus' Messianic claims is 'the historical moment which has determined the tragic destiny of the Jew over these past two thousand years'.⁸¹

Alter criticizes Steiner's insistent search for absolute explanations and historical ultimacies, arguing that this essentially theological perspective leads him to melodrama and histrionics. Human history, Alter argues, is certainly a more complicated and manifold process than Steiner leads us to believe. While

⁸⁰Carlo Ginzburg, "Just One Witness," in *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution"*, Saul Friedländer, ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 96.

⁸¹Alter, "Against Messiness," *Times Literary Supplement*, 23.

he recognizes Steiner's talent for writing fiction, Alter accuses him of melodramatic excess in his pursuit of final causation to explain the Shoah and Hitler's role within it. Addressing Steiner's fictitious portrayal of Hitler on trial for his crimes in *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, Alter states:

And when history is directly addressed...we get another master-narrative leading to modern genocide, a line drawn by Hitler from the massacre of the Canaanites in the Book of Joshua to the Final Solution that seems perilously close to having the author's endorsement.⁸²

Both of George Steiner's ethical and intellectual fixations -- Nazi barbarism and the problematic [or "demonic"] medium of language -- converge in his second work of fiction, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, published in 1981. The book is Steiner's imaginative interpretation of the aged Adolf Hitler's capture, by a group of Israeli commandos, in the Amazon jungle. The slim novella is oriented around two competing monologues -- the first, by the director of the Israeli operation and a survivor himself, Emmanuel Lieber, and the second, a final word of self-defense by Adolf Hitler. Steiner, who admits to being fascinated by the demonic power of Hitler's language and his oratorical ability, revealed in an interview for *The Paris Review* his artistic intentions in *The Portage*:

I wanted there to draw attention precisely to the terrible ambiguity in all language, in all speech acts....I tried to show that in Hitler's language there was antimatter, anti-language, that which is transcendently annihilating of truth and meaning. And that it had to clash with Judaism, which is a faith, a culture, a trust based perhaps excessively on the word, on the articulacy and possibility

⁸²Ibid.

of meaning and on constant discourse even with God.⁸³

For Steiner, Hitler is the master manipulator of language and meaning. Emmanuel Lieber's lament, in chapter six, gives form to Steiner's intentions and voices Steiner's own thought on Hitler's use of language:

His tongue is like no other. It is the tongue of the basilisk, a hundred-forked and quick as a flame. As it is written in the learned Nathaniel of Mainz: there shall come upon the earth in the time of night a man surpassing eloquent. All that is God's, hallowed be His name, must have its counterpart, its backside of evil and negation. So it is with the Word...He created on the night-side of language a speech for hell. Whose words mean hatred and vomit of life. Few men can learn that speech or speak it for long. It burns their mouths. It draws them into death. But there shall come a man whose mouth shall be as a furnace and whose tongue as a sword laying waste. He will know the grammar of hell and teach it to others. He will know the sounds of madness and loathing and make them seem music....he who very nearly did us to death, who deafened God so that the covenant seemed broken and our children given to ash. Do not let him speak freely.⁸⁴

In the book, Lieber and Hitler do not actually confront each other physically. Steiner has them meet on the battlefield of language -- each character expresses himself in a single chapter -- with Hitler responding to Lieber's accusations and concluding the book. Alvin Rosenfeld, in his review of *The Portage*, makes this same point, while at once confirming Steiner's design of the clash between (Jewish) language and (Hitler's) anti-language:

Since Steiner keeps them physically apart, their encounter is represented as taking place on the level of language, or within language between two distinctly different attitudes toward the word, the one dedicated to representing the truths of history and the Lord of history, the other an apocalyptic assault against historical and theological thinking and the people who carry it

⁸³Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 56.

⁸⁴George Steiner, *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), 33.

forward into the world.⁸⁵

The last chapter of the book is Hitler's sustained monologue of self-defense, his only utterance, in response to Lieber's charges of mass murder. His self-defense is based on four main points: that he used the Jewish concepts of a "chosen people" and a "promised land" as a model for Nazi racism; that the Jews are responsible for antisemitism, as it is a reaction to "the blackmail of transcendence" (the Jewish reminder to humanity of a higher moral standard, through Judaism's creation of monotheism, Jesus Christ, and Marxism); that Stalin was responsible for more murders, thirty million to be exact, than he himself was; and finally, that he actually helped the Jews since, by perpetrating the Holocaust, he guaranteed the establishment of the State of Israel.⁸⁶

The Portage has both been celebrated as a brave confrontation with the evil meaning and presence of Hitler,⁸⁷ and dismissed as "an upsetting and misleading piece of anti-Jewish propaganda of a regrettably contemporary kind which may prove to be of aid and comfort to anti-Semites for some years to

⁸⁵Alvin Rosenfeld, "Steiner's Hitler," review of *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, by George Steiner, *Salmagundi*, no. 52-53 (Spring-Summer 1981), 160-174: 170.

⁸⁶ Steiner has been severely criticized for putting his own theories and arguments in the mouth of Adolf Hitler. All four articles of Hitler's defence can be found in Steiner's theoretical writings – he illuminates his theory of antisemitism in chapter two of *In Bluebeard's Castle*, and in chapter eleven of Berel Lang's book, *Writing and the Holocaust*. The last two points are briefly discussed in another work, *Language and Silence*.

⁸⁷Rosenfeld, "Hitler," *Salmagundi*, 173.

come...".⁸⁸ At the end of the novella, Steiner's Hitler has been granted the last word -- there is no rebuttal of his arguments or any defense of the Jewish people in the face of Hitler's slanderous attack. His Hitler subverts meaning by inverting language, so that words lose their customary meaning and can be manipulated inside his death idiom -- the Nazi grammar of hell. Alvin Rosenfeld argues that for Steiner to close the novel on this note, "is to succumb, rhetorically, to the seductive eloquence of negation, a closure that runs counter to the major thrust of George Steiner's whole career and the high standards of moral intelligence it has consistently upheld."⁸⁹ Robert Boyers argues that *The Portage had* to end with Hitler's words, because his speech "demonstrates that a Hitler can appropriate a Steiner for his purposes by willfully ignoring and thus violating the spirit and intent of Steiner's original utterances and turning them to totally alien purposes."⁹⁰

Steiner's first attempt, then, at representing the Holocaust was conveyed through the words of its primary architect -- Adolf Hitler. Yet Steiner - who was to write on the failure of language before the unimaginable reality of the Holocaust -- does not analyze his own endeavour to speak of the unspeakable in his published work. He admits that he "was profoundly worried

⁸⁸Hyam Maccoby, "George Steiner's 'Hitler'," review of *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.*, by George Steiner, *Encounter* 58, no. 5 (May 1982), 27-34: 30.

⁸⁹Rosenfeld, "Hitler," *Salmagundi*, 173.

⁹⁰Robert Boyers, "Steiner's Holocaust: Politics and Theology," *Salmagundi* no. 66 (Winter/Summer 1985), 26-49: 46.

about it, and [he] would certainly not dare to come back to it."⁹¹ In *The Portage*, Steiner has seen fit to appropriate the historical persona of Hitler, accompanied by our pre-conceptions and moral judgements, and to create a fictitious Adolf who is an articulate, "philosophical" old man. It makes one uneasy to have history manipulated before one's very eyes by a fictitious Hitler speaking words that, as a vicious Jew-hater and an atheist, he was incapable of expressing in reality. Steiner does not qualify or justify his own creative appropriation of the Holocaust.⁹² He does, however, acknowledge and defend the right of an artist to try to find a way to penetrate this seemingly unrepresentable reality. Steiner believes that while a major act of interpretation comes nearer to the heart of the subject, "it never comes too near."⁹³ Robert Boyers recognizes this provisional quality in Steiner's work:

...*The Portage* gestures vigorously at what can only be an absent cause, that is, at the totality of human motives and relations that made possible the holocaust but must remain permanently unavailable to the representational enterprise. Where *The Portage* differs, again, from most other political novels is in its conviction that, though the cause is ever worth pursuing, and must ever be sought in the precincts of human motives, ideas, and institutions, it is likely to be elsewhere, in a precinct unamenable to common sense or careful literary design.⁹⁴

⁹¹Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 56.

⁹²Steiner admits that he is leery of any person who attempts to capitalize on the Holocaust who did not go through it. For example, Sylvia Plath's appropriation of Holocaust imagery in her poetry is problematic for Steiner, as was NBC's broadcast of Gerald Green's "Holocaust", with its images of ovens interrupted every fourteen minutes by commercials for pantyhose and deodorant. See Steiner, "The Archives of Eden," *No Passion Spent*, 303.

⁹⁰Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 57-58.

⁹⁴Boyers, "Holocaust," *Salmagundi*, 49.

For Steiner, the meaning and origins of the Shoah are intricately complex. Despite his literary commitment, he believes that any worthwhile attempt at comprehending the causal dynamics of Jew-hatred and the nightmare world of Auschwitz must lie in the theological-metaphysical realm, in the ambiguous after-life of religious feeling in Western culture⁹⁵, and hence will remain provisional.⁹⁶

⁹⁵Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle*, 46.

⁹⁶Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 165.

CHAPTER THREE

In Silence: George Steiner's Approach to the Shoah

*Son of Man, keep not silent, forget not
the deeds of Tyranny, Cry out at the
disaster of a people.*

Yehuda L. Bialer

Silence is a fence for wisdom.

Rabbi Akiva

Troubled by the directions taken by language, culture, and humanity in the twentieth century, Steiner sees the Nazi extermination of European Jewry as the key point of rupture not only in modern German or European, but in all preceding human, history. It is with and through the Shoah that not only Germans and bystanders, but we as a species, enter into barbarism. Auschwitz marks, according to Steiner, an abandonment of the human and a regression to bestiality which, in turn, ushers in a new, distinctly modern, human capacity for savagery. Steiner believes it is our capacity for language that separates human beings from animals; therefore, our use of language is, for him, the measure of our humanity. Yet human language, which made "man" possible, was also used to construct and to execute (and to record) the "Final Solution to the Jewish Question". Language is, therefore, implicated in these crimes alongside the individual perpetrators.

Steiner views this situation as one of reciprocal failing -- "Words fail us, as we have failed *them*." On a collective, historical scale, "Auschwitz [signifies] the *death of man* as a rational, 'forward-dreaming' speech-organism (the *zoon phonanta* of Greek philosophy). The languages we are now speaking on this

polluted and suicidal planet are 'post-human.'"⁹⁸ What confident processes of rational analysis and causal explanation, Steiner asks his readers, are available to language after the cancer of reason, the travesty of all meaningfulness, enacted in and symbolized by the unmitigated horror of the Shoah?⁹⁹ Steiner believes that it is, indeed, possible that human language, constrained as it is by the intellect and imagination, falls short of being able to comprehend, or to express, the Shoah experience. Is there a form of human language that is capable of conceptualizing and understanding the meaning and magnitude of Auschwitz? Or does the comprehension and description of the abysmal and sustained inhumanity of the Shoah fall outside the limits of human language? Are we, as human beings, capable, within the parameters of human reason and discourse, of understanding and communicating the Catastrophe that was the Holocaust?

Steiner admits that the doubts produced by these questions have led him to the conclusion, albeit provisional, that silence is our only option; "that to try to speak or write intelligibly, interpretively, about Auschwitz is to misconceive totally the nature of that event and to misconstrue totally the necessary constraints of humanity within language."¹⁰⁰ The only adequate explanation, according to Steiner, for the obsessively homicidal quality of Nazi antisemitism -- whose progeny was the Death-Camp Kingdom -- is to be found

⁹⁸Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 156.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*

in an examination of Christian religious doctrine and its subconscious, residual manifestations in the secularized collective psyche of the West. For Steiner, then, the deeper theological and metaphysical levels of culture, society, *and* language hold the only key able to unlock the *mystery* (in the true religious sense) of Auschwitz.

The evolution of Steiner's conception of silence, in relation to the Shoah, takes three different forms. Initially, Steiner views silence as the only possible humane reaction in the face of Nazi inhumanity. He argues that there is no possible way for a human being to understand or convey the profundity of horror, loss, pain, and sorrow that was perpetrated upon the Jewish people (and by extension, upon humanity) by the Shoah. Human language and our capacity for reason, totally overwhelmed by this degree of barbarism, simply disintegrate in the face of such sustained horror. Elie Wiesel describes the dilemma presented by our attempt to speak about the Shoah:

For what happened goes beyond words, beyond imagination. To make words of it would be blasphemous. Rebbe Mendel of Kotzk said that truth can sometimes be communicated by words, though there is a level of truth so deep it can be conveyed only by silence. And then, lastly, there is somewhere in man a truth so profound and so disturbing that it cannot be transmitted at all. The Holocaust must then be placed in this category.¹⁰¹

For Steiner, it is more appropriate to be silent in the face of the mass murder of six million innocent human beings, of whom 1.5 million were children, than to attempt an appraisal or description of the Shoah that will simply result in a "flattening out", a minimization and, therefore, a normalization, of the

¹⁰¹Elie Wiesel, "From Holocaust to Rebirth," in *Against Silence: The Voice and Vision of Elie Wiesel*, vol.1, Irving Abrahamson, ed. (New York: Holocaust Library, 1985), 12.

experience.

Silence is also seen by Steiner as an important way of registering one's opposition to inhumanity. For some, he argues, it is the last available weapon to use in defence of one's own moral identity. Facing what appears to be unending torture and atrocity in human culture, Steiner asserts that, "you might argue that one of the last forms of effective opposition is to shut up, that one of the real forms of non-cooperation is silence."¹⁰² This argument is also made by Steiner to defend the actions of several authors who chose to stop writing:

...I was trying to defend the decision of certain very important poets in our time not to write, and by not writing I meant something larger. There have been suicides, actual literal suicides by very leading voices [Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Primo Levy, Jerzy Kosinski, Bruno Bettelheim, Tadeusz Borowski], there have been decisions no longer to publish, there is a great spectrum of critiques. One of the great difficulties is once you join in the general mess of voices, and I think we'd all agree on this, one's own protest very rapidly can become a stylized feature of the official landscape.¹⁰³

While Steiner honours the moral integrity of these individuals, he also describes their choice as "undoubtedly suicidal and ultimately self-defeating".¹⁰⁴ According to Steiner, for a Jew to fall silent on any part of his or her history is self-mutilation. "...if there can be no such intelligible and significant incorporation [of the Shoah experience], what will befall that lived sense of an unbroken past, that ontological historicity, which has, until now,

¹⁰²George Steiner, "Interview with George Steiner," interview by Frank Levy, Joel Schechter, Carolyn Seeley, Jon Marks, and John McCaffrey, *Yale Theatre* 3, no. 2 (1971), 4-13: 4.

¹⁰³*ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁴*ibid.*

been the immediate context of Jewish self-recognition, both personally and communally?"¹⁰⁵ Steiner, like survivors themselves, suffers from a divided allegiance to both sides of the opposing thought on Holocaust representation – the aesthetic-expressive impossibility of communicating the Shoah experience, and the over-riding moral responsibility to do so.

Steiner's concept of silence has evolved into a kind of compromise. Finally, in the attempt to accommodate this division within himself, Steiner uses the concept of "silence" as a metaphor to warn against the use of ordinary linguistic-aesthetic techniques when writing about the *tremendum*, the Shoah. Much of what has been produced on the subject, he argues, is not only inadequate, but actually harmful: by reducing and reproducing it within normal, articulate, acceptable language its tendency is to add a kind of illusory normalization or *acceptability* to the phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ In effect, Steiner argues that we cannot employ pedestrian language, our mundane vocabulary of daily human existence, to re-present the monstrous circumstances of the Shoah. Steiner's work has as its core both a desire to sustain the outrage one feels when faced with evil incarnate, and a refusal to incorporate, and thereby to normalize, the Shoah within our history and our collective memory:

The wide-scale reversion to torture and mass-murder, the ubiquitous use of hunger and imprisonment as political means, mark not only a crisis of culture but, quite conceivably, an abandonment of the rational order of man. It may well be that it is

¹⁰⁵Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 155. For an excellent discussion of the critical role played by historical memory in Jewish history, see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

¹⁰⁶See note number 89 in Chapter Two of this paper.

a mere fatuity, an indecency to debate of the definition of culture in the age of the gas-oven, of the arctic camps, of napalm. The topic may belong solely to the past history of hope. But we should not take this contingency to be a natural fact of life, a platitude. We must keep in sharp focus its hideous novelty or renovation. We must keep vital in ourselves a sense of scandal so overwhelming that it affects every significant aspect of our position in history and society. We have, as Emily Dickinson would have said, to keep the soul terribly surprised. I cannot stress this enough.¹⁰⁷

Steiner's call for "silence" is another attempt to act as our collective conscience -- to remind us of our obligation to humanity and of the low level of tolerance we should have, as human beings, for bestiality. Steiner argues passionately against any attempt at casual representation of the Shoah. Anyone who truly attempts to enter the world of Auschwitz, Steiner argues, will not leave intact:

The notion of 'coming to terms' with the Holocaust is a vulgar and profound indecency. Man cannot, he must not ever 'come to terms', historicize pragmatically or incorporate into the comforts of reason his derogation from the human within himself. He must not blur the possibility that the death-camps and the world's indifference to them marked the failure of a crucial experiment: man's effort to become fully human. After Auschwitz Jew and gentile go lamed, as if the wrestling-bout of Jacob had been well and truly lost.¹⁰⁸

If we refuse to be silent and do attempt an intellectual confrontation with the Shoah, Steiner argues that a new language of representation, one that can convey the weight of the horror and loss experienced by the victims of the Shoah, must be created. It could very well be, argues Steiner, that the Shoah

¹⁰⁷Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle*, 43.

¹⁰⁸George Steiner, "Through That Glass Darkly," in *No Passion Spent: Essays 1978-1995*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 345.

has destroyed "the life-giving mystery of meaningful metaphor in Western speech and, correlatively, in that highest organization of speech which we call poetry and philosophic thought."¹⁰⁹ Indeed, what metaphor could possibly be used to convey the unspeakable cruelty and human criminality that was Auschwitz? Steiner argues that to speak about the Shoah, one must invent a new language, a new way of speaking, a new trope that will carry the full weight of the destruction, loss, sorrow, and horror -- a sense of the radical challenge to the meaning of our conception of humanity and of civilization -- embodied in the Holocaust.

Steiner does not describe his thoughts, in detail, of in what this new language of representation might consist. One may assume, however, that it would be a metaphysical, indeed theological, idiom capable of addressing Steiner's concerns for the "deeper" meaning and representation of the Shoah. Here, Steiner also stresses the importance of the German language itself in any attempt at a general post-Holocaust restoration of human language. He argues that if there is to be a rehumanization and reparation of language, that it must begin within the "death-idiom" itself:

Possibly the only language in which anything intelligible, anything responsible, about the Shoah can be attempted is German. It is in German, at the very source of its modern genius and linguistic conventions, that is, in Luther's pamphlets of the early 1540s, that the elimination, the *Ausrottung* of the Jew from Europe, that the burning alive of the Jew, is clearly enunciated. It is in the seminal call to German nationhood, in Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*, that Jew-hatred is given the sanction of a major philosophy. It is in German that Heine, as early as 1820, voices the plain warning that where certain books are being burned, human

¹⁰⁹Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 170.

beings will be. It is Nietzsche who, with almost somnambular clarity, identifies murderous anti-Semitism as being the defining dynamism of the German spirit. It is Kafka's parable, notably "The Metamorphosis" and "In the Penal Colony," that exactly prevision the vocabulary, in technocracy, the politics and psychology of the subhuman, as these are fulfilled in the concentration-camp state. It is Karl Krauss who concretely dates the 'last days of humanity,' who gives the apocalypse of the inhuman its calendar. The literally unspeakable words that are used to plan, to prescribe, to record, to justify the Shoah: the words that entail and set down the burning alive of children in front of their parent's eyes; the slow drowning of old men and women in excrement; the eradication of millions in a verbose bureaucracy of murder – these are German words. They are words to which the hallucinatory fantastications, the death-Kitsch of Nazi oratory, gave a force, a consequence that few other words have possessed in human history.¹¹⁰

To further understand what Steiner means by an adequate language of representation, it is necessary to locate the writers whom Steiner recognizes as having achieved this standard of expression and analysis in their own work on the Shoah. Not surprisingly the select few who meet Steiner's stringent literary demands are all survivors of the Shoah. In fact, he argues that "Where the language is still humane, in the root sense of that word, it is being spoken by survivors, remembrancers and ghosts. Its haunted music is that of the embers that continue to crackle in the cooling ash of a dead fire."¹¹¹ In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Steiner admits that out of the whole range of Holocaust literature only three or four writers have managed to "communicate

¹¹⁰Ibid., 157. For a discussion of the public's present fascination with the cult and kitsch of Nazism, see Saul Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1982).

¹¹¹Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 156.

something of the essential experience."¹¹² Paul Celan, Jean Améry, Primo Levi, and Elie Wiesel have all made bold attempts to bear witness to the Shoah. The languages spoken by these survivor-writers are authentic, according to Steiner, given their incorporation of a realm of feeling and experience that cannot be translated. All of these writers speak in silence – from their work the reader understands what can be said, and is forced to intuit what must remain unsaid. These writers are suspended, as is Steiner, between the knowledge that what they are desperately trying to express is ineffable, and the obligation of survival, that is, to remember and transmit the Shoah experience. They all recognize, to one degree or another, the futility of what they are trying to accomplish.

In his 1970 Address to the World Federation of Bergen-Belsen Associations, Elie Wiesel describes the frustration a survivor-writer must feel when attempting to represent the Shoah:

The Holocaust is impossible to communicate because it has to do with silence, even with silence in the words we say, a silence beyond the words, the deepest silence in us. On the other hand, some of us have written about the Holocaust, and my fear is that although we have done that, we have actually written about something else. We have written about a different planet, about something that had only the physical appearance of the Holocaust. Actually, we have never been able to carry out an echo or a reflection, visual or otherwise, from that cursed universe.¹¹³

It would seem from Steiner's recognition of survivor memoirs and poetry as the only adequate languages of representation, that he would argue that one had

¹¹²Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 55.

¹¹³Elie Wiesel quoted in Abrahamson, *Against Silence*, 13.

personally to experience the Shoah in order to attempt its representation. Indeed, "what horrifies [him] is any attempt to capitalize on this material by those who did not undergo it."¹¹⁴ Here, the poetry of Sylvia Plath can provide a useful example of Steiner's problem with aesthetic representations of the Shoah. Plath¹¹⁵ is an artist who appropriated the horrific imagery of the Holocaust and used it in her own poetry, thereby attempting to express her own personal feelings of victimization. Steiner is deeply troubled by her poems -- "Daddy", "Getting There", "Lady Lazarus", and "Childless Woman" -- because he is unable confidently to categorize her work. Is her work simply "confessional" poetry, or can it be seen as one of the few valid responses of language and imagination to the Shoah? Plath presents an even more significant dilemma for Steiner, since her poetry prompts the question: do non-survivors have the ability to re-present an experience as extraordinarily murderous as the Shoah, that they were never actually forced to endure? Similarly, do these same individuals, non-Jewish artists in particular, have the right to speak of the Shoah or employ its imagery at will? Steiner states that Plath's grim fiction leaves him uneasy:

Does any writer, does any human being other than an actual survivor, have the right to put on this death-rig? Auschwitz and Belsen lodge at the centre of our current lives and sensibilities like the energized, malignant void of a Gnostic vision of

¹¹⁴Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 56.

¹¹⁵Sylvia Plath was not Jewish. Her father was Prussian-born and her mother was of Austrian descent. For a discussion of her work in relation to the field of Holocaust literature, see Alvin Rosenfeld, "Exploiting Atrocity," in *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

damnation. The imagination touches on them at its peril; in some corrosive way, the material flatters those who, in safety and at a distance of time, invoke it. Pathos can corrupt when images which exceed pathos are too deliberately used. Particularly for the benefit of art. What extra-territorial right had Sylvia Plath – she was a child, plump and golden in America, when the trains actually went – to draw on the reserves of animate horror in the ash and the children's shoes? This is precisely where the private issues intrude. Even where the chosen fiction is most impersonal, where the poet's fierce honesty bears witness against hell, betrayingly private images of surgery, mental breakdown and attempted suicide crop up. Do any of us have license to locate our personal disasters, raw as these may be, in Auschwitz?¹¹⁶

At the same time, however, he defends William Styron and his decision to write the Holocaust novel, *Sophie's Choice*. Steiner states, "Styron is a prodigious novelist, and he has every right to do a Nat Turner or a Sophie. No one has the right to say he was never a black slave or in Auschwitz. We can say, 'Sorry, it doesn't work.' But *it is the absolute right of an artist, in my opinion, to try*" (italics mine).¹¹⁷ This seeming contradiction only makes sense if one understands Steiner to mean that it is wholly inappropriate to use the horror of the Shoah as a metaphor to communicate something unrelated to the Holocaust, while it is, however, acceptable for a *capable and dedicated* artist to at least attempt a meaningful approximation of the Shoah experience itself.

There is one artist, a survivor himself, who sought to express the Shoah, and who is not merely recognized, but is embraced and celebrated, by George Steiner – the poet, Paul Celan. Indeed, Steiner first introduced Celan, through

¹¹⁶George Steiner, "In Extremis," in *The Cambridge Mind: Ninety Years of the Cambridge Review, 1879-1969*, Eric Homberger, William Janeway, and Simon Schama, eds. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970), 305.

¹¹⁷Steiner, "Art," *The Paris Review*, 56-57.

incessant reference to his work, to the English-speaking world. Paul Antschel (Celan is an anagram he later adopted) had lived in Czernowitz, Bukovina [Romania] before World War II. His mother and father refused to go into hiding with him when the deportations of Jews began, and were sent to the killing grounds of Transnistria where they both perished. Celan spent the war working in several Romanian forced labour camps and after 1948 left Bucharest for Vienna to escape Stalinism. Within a year he left Austria for France, and settled in Paris with his new wife and their son, Eric. For many years, and even after his great literary success, Celan suffered serious bouts of depression and hospitalization, finally succumbing to despair in April 1970 by drowning himself in the Seine.¹¹⁸

In Steiner's estimation, Celan is one of the greatest poets in modern European literature, and is perhaps "an even more *necessary* poet than Rilke."¹¹⁹ Steiner has called Celan the only poet -- the only writer -- "on a level with Auschwitz."¹²⁰ Celan is central to Steiner's thought on language and Holocaust representation because he alone, in Steiner's opinion, has managed to create a new language of representation and, through it, was able to pierce the heart of the Shoah experience -- and this in German. The German language was Celan's mother-tongue passed down to him by his own mother, with whom

¹¹⁸See Janet Schenk McCord, "A Study of the Suicides of Eight Holocaust Survivor/Writers" (Ph.D. diss., Boston University, 1995). For a complete study of Paul Celan and his work, see John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁹Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 166.

¹²⁰*Ibid.*, 157.

he had an intensely close relationship. The memories Celan had of his mother were filtered through the German language. So, for Celan, German was not simply the murderous tongue of the Nazis, but a language that carried his only connection to a loving and nurturing mother. For this reason, Paul Celan chose to write in German, trying to reclaim the language and to express his own reality, that of a Jewish survivor, within it. Many German-Jews who survived the Holocaust felt the German language, the (pre-Nazi) language of Goethe, to be their only remaining home. Celan echoed this feeling when he accepted the Bremen Prize, in January 1958, stating that “only one thing remained reachable, close and secure amid all losses: language. Yes, language. In spite of everything, it remained secure against loss.”¹²¹

Steiner argues that Celan's poetry was a process of self-translation *into* German. “In the process the receptor-language becomes unhoused, broken, idiosyncratic almost to the point of non-communication. It becomes a ‘meta-German’ cleansed of historical-political dirt and thus, alone, usable by a profoundly Jewish voice after the holocaust.”¹²² It is this sense of having successfully turned the German language against itself, purifying it by expunging its Hitlerian residue, which gives the work of Paul Celan its celebrated place in Steiner's mind and in the field of Holocaust literature itself. Steiner views Celan's relationship with the German language as acutely paradoxical, un-resolved and, finally, self-destructive. His later poems became

¹²¹Haskell M. Block, ed., *The Poetry of Paul Celan*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 23.

¹²²Steiner, *After Babel*, 389.

increasingly cryptic and began to shut out his audience. It is as if language, the only constant in Celan's life, finally failed him in its task as communicator, connector and mediator, and so his life became too desolate to bear.

Steiner and Celan share similar concerns: the effects of the Shoah on the form and content of language; the crucial role of German, in both confronting the Shoah and redeeming language generally; and the impossible necessity of communicating between the world of Auschwitz and our own. Yet Steiner most intensely responds to what he sees in Celan's work as a decision to operate within a theological context to find meaning in the Shoah experience. As it concerns the presence and absence of God in the world, Celan's poetry is at once theological and metaphysical. The "religious" concerns of both Celan and Steiner connect them intellectually and explain Steiner's embrace of Celan as the only poet to have reached the heart of the Shoah experience. According to Steiner, Celan's poetry, through its use of metaphor and symbolism, inhabits the theological-metaphysical levels of language and, as a result, roots the Shoah experience within the definitions of humanity, history, and human speech:

The necessary and sufficient condition for Celan's poems is the situation of all human saying after the Shoah, a situation that Celan lived and articulated in the absent face of God. In this one supreme witness...the fate of the Jew, the night-charged genius of the German language, of the idiom of Auschwitz and Belsen, and a profound intimacy with the Hebraic and the Yiddish legacy coalesced; and they coalesced around the central criteria of the theological and the metaphysical orders of questioning.¹²³

As evidence of his argument, Steiner cites Celan's poem, "Psalm":

¹²³Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 166.

Niemand knetet uns wieder aus Erde und Lehm,
niemand bespricht unsern Staub.
Niemand.

Gelobt seist du, Niemand.
Dir zulieb wollen
wir blühen.
Dir
entgegen.

Ein Nichts
waren wir, sind wir, werden
wir bleiben, blühend:
die Nichts--, die
Niemand'srose.

Mit
dem Griffel seelenhell,
dem Staubfaden himmelswüst,
der Krone rot
vom Purpurwort, das wir sangen
über, o über
dem Dorn.

* * *

No-one kneads us again out of earth and loam,
No-one bespeaks our dust.
No-one.

Praise unto thee, No-one.
For love of you will
we bloom.
Towards/against
You.

A nothing
were we, are we, will
we remain, blooming:
No-one's-rose.

With
the stylus soul-bright
the dust-thread sky-waste,
the crown reddened
by the purple word, which we sang
above, o above
the thorn.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ibid., 167-168.

Only Celan, argues Steiner, has found adequate expression for the “No-oneness” that was God during the Shoah. Through his poem, Celan confronts the absence, impotence and indifference of God during the Holocaust. And through the name “Niemand”, Celan stresses the subsequent “exit of God” from language and from the bounds of human experience. Yet Steiner points out that even in the absent face of God, Celan sustains the perennial Jewish tradition of human dialogue with God. Steiner sees the poem as an “accusation out of ash, [a] blossoming indictment that, alone, tells against the finality of annihilation.”¹²⁵ Steiner argues that Celan's poetry, like the Shoah experience itself, resists secular, rational analysis:

We move here in the sphere of lived metaphor, of language *beside itself*, which is one of the (wholly insufficient) images or tropes whereby we can come nearer the question with which I began: that of the very possibilities of human discourse in regard to God and to the Shoah – a duality that has, for the Jew, been made an irreparable unison. To ask what, if any, are such possibilities is to ask metaphysically and theologically. It is to recognize the essential inadequacy of pragmatic-positivist levels of argument....The question of Auschwitz is far greater than that of the pathology of politics or of economic and social-ethnic conflicts (important as these are). It is a question of the conceivable existence or nonexistence of God, of the “No-one” who made us, who did not speak out of the death wind, and who is now on trial.¹²⁶

Steiner's work has increasingly become haunted by theological concerns. In his recent book, *Real Presences*, Steiner argues that “where God's presence is no longer a tenable supposition and where His absence is no longer a felt, indeed overwhelming, weight, certain dimensions of thought and

¹²⁵Ibid., 168.

¹²⁶Ibid., 170.

creativity are no longer attainable.”¹²⁷ The “scientific-secular” environment by which we are increasingly surrounded is both responsible for and a result of the existential absence of God:

The density of God’s absence, the edge of presence in that absence, is no empty dialectical twist. The phenomenology is elementary: it is like the recession from us of one whom we have loved or sought to love or of one before whom we have dwelt in fear. The distancing is, then, charged with the pressures of a nearness out of reach, of a remembrance torn at the edges. It is this absent ‘thereness’, in the death-camps, in the laying waste of a grimed planet, which is articulate in the master-texts of our age. It lies in Kafka’s parables, in the namings of Golgotha in Beckett’s *Endgame*, in the Psalms to No-one of Paul Celan.¹²⁸

Steiner believes that God’s presence gives our humanity substance, meaning and inspiration in that it provides a stable foundation and rationale for our existence. Just as we must approach a text with the assumption that it is meaningful and translatable, humanity must “wager on transcendence” or live *as if* God existed -- in the hope of God’s existence.¹²⁹

Steiner is not a religious Jew, and as a result his “theological” concern has led to his being accused by critics of wanting “to enjoy a supernatural aesthetic without the obligation of supernatural belief.”¹³⁰ Exactly what Steiner means by a “theological-metaphysical category of analysis”, in relation to the Shoah, remains unclear. In his article on recent themes in Steiner’s work,

¹²⁷George Steiner, *Real Presences*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 229.

¹²⁸*ibid.*, 229-230.

¹²⁹*ibid.*, 4.

¹³⁰James Wood, review of *No Passion Spent: Essays, 1978-1995*, by George Steiner, in *The New Republic* (30 September 1996), 32-38: 35.

Ronald A. Sharp admits, "There are times, in Steiner's recent explorations [of the Shoah, and of artistic production], when one wishes he would be more precise about his conceptions of the theological, the transcendent, and the metaphysical, categories and terms which he too often uses interchangeably."¹³¹ Steiner's interest in theology has affected his thinking generally and now informs his thought on the Shoah:

Theology tells of 'the real presence' in the symbolic object, of the 'mystery' in the form. Today, more and more of my work is an attempt to clarify these concepts, to discover whether and in what rational framework it is possible to have a theory and practice of understanding (hermeneutics) and a theory and practice of value-judgements (aesthetics) without a theological re-insurance or underwriting.¹³²

Steiner increasingly chooses to focus his analysis of the Shoah on what he considers to be its theological origins. He argues that the vehement and persistent nature of Jew-hatred can only be explained by the Christian understanding of, and obsession with, the Jewish refusal to accept Christ as the Messiah. "The identifying destiny of the Jew, but also in a more oblique sense, that of the Christian, is that of the ineradicable scars left by that hour of denial, by the veto of the Jew."¹³³ According to Steiner, the Shoah differs ontologically from other examples of the inhuman at the deeper level of philosophic intent. He argues, "Long-buried, and freed of doctrinal inhibitions and abstractions [in an anti- or post-Christian society], the symbols and

¹³¹Ronald A. Sharp, "Interrogation at the Borders: George Steiner and the Trope of Translation," *New Literary History* 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1989/90), 133-162: 146.

¹³²Steiner, "Introduction," *Reader*, 8.

¹³³Steiner, "Through," *No Passion Spent*, 335.

metaphors that cluster around the Judaic invention and 'killing' of God (the two are, psychologically, twinned) turned murderous."¹³⁴ Indeed, this "philosophic intent", Steiner believes, will only be found deep within the foundations of Western culture -- "in the relations between instinctual and religious life."¹³⁵

If the Shoah is distinctly unique and if human comprehension strictly functions in terms of comparison, then the possibility of our being able to both understand and represent the Holocaust is questionable. The unique nature and specific dynamics of antisemitism, according to Steiner, delineate the Shoah and separate it from other acts of atrocity in human history. Steiner credits the Jewish people with creating three paradigms for human perfectibility, which have all placed great psychic stress on humanity as a whole. Monotheism, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and the form of secular Messianism known as Marxism all place stringent moral demands, and a psychologically unrealistic imperative of perfection, upon human beings. These demands and ideals, beyond the natural grasp of most people, were forced upon the world by what Steiner terms the "blackmail of transcendence":

Surmount yourself. Surpass the opaque barriers of the mind to attain pure abstraction. Lose your life in order to gain it. Give up property, rank, worldly comfort. Love your neighbour as you do yourself -- no, much more, for self-love is sin. Make any sacrifice, endure any insult, even self-denunciation, so that justice may prevail.' Unceasingly, the blackmail of perfection has hammered at the confused, mundane, egotistical fabric of common,

¹³⁴Steiner, "Long Life," *Writing*, 165.

¹³⁵Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle*, 36.

instinctual behaviour.¹³⁶

Steiner believes that the subconscious resentment felt by humankind for the Jew is based on the Jewish invention of a “superhuman” standard of behaviour and feeling. It is this enduring animosity that was at the heart of the Nazi desire to exterminate the Jewish people, and it also accounts in his view for the indifference to Jewish suffering felt by so many others. In this sense, the Holocaust was an attempt to kill those who not only murdered God but had first created Him:

Deep loathings built up in the social subconscious, murderous resentments. The mechanism is simple but primordial. *We hate most those who hold out to us a goal, an ideal, a visionary promise which, even though we have stretched our muscles to the utmost, we cannot reach, which slips, again and again, just out of range of our racked fingers -- yet, and this is crucial, which remains profoundly desirable, which we cannot reject because we fully acknowledge its supreme value.*¹³⁷

Steiner views Nazism as a return to pre-monotheistic paganism -- a world, unlike Christendom, where the Jew was no longer necessary for the realization of God's promise in and through Christ. It is no surprise to Steiner that Auschwitz erupted out of an increasingly agnostic, post-Christian society.¹³⁸ Steiner argues that the Nazis were freed from the Christian obligation to protect the Jew (both for humanitarian reasons and to preserve the “remnant” of Jews who would in the end confirm Christ as the Messiah) and proceeded to murder the Jew in an unbridled, and unprecedented, frenzy of suppressed

¹³⁶*ibid.*, 40-41.

¹³⁷*ibid.*, 41.

¹³⁸Steiner, “Long Life,” *Writing*, 165.

resentment and ancient hatred.

Critics have attacked Steiner for his controversial “metaphysical” theory of antisemitism. Hyam Maccoby accuses Steiner of making the Holocaust into a cosmic, rather than a terrestrial, catastrophe. Maccoby agrees with him in so far as what is needed is not more sociological-historical studies of antisemitism, but an investigation into the psychology of religion. Yet according to Maccoby, Steiner's theory is misleading in that it assumes antisemitism to be part of the human condition rather than strictly a disease of Christian society. He makes the point that rather than representing the conscience of humanity, the Jews in Western culture have, more often than not, been portrayed as the earthly representatives of its exact opposite -- cosmic Evil. Maccoby argues that in fact Steiner's theory, as far as it characterizes Christianity and Judaism, is an inversion of the truth:

It is characteristic of Judaism to stress the *possibility* of the moral life; to say that God's law has been tailored to the needs and limitations of the human flesh (which is, after all, the creation of God and is not evil). It is characteristic of Christianity to stress the *impossibility* of the moral life (See Paul's, Epistles), and to set standards at a strained, angelic level, in order to emphasise the indispensability of vicarious atonement by the Crucifixion of Jesus and the desperate wickedness of the natural man, who cannot be saved by his own efforts....George Steiner's assertion of an inhuman Judaism, abstractly superior to human needs, is his own invention....Anti-Semitism is not caused by the “Jewish elements” in Christianity, provoking resentment from the natural man. It is caused by the atavistic, pagan element in Western religion by which the Jews are regarded as a collective Executioner of [Jesus Christ].¹³⁹

Maccoby believes that “Our intellectual and moral duty must be to look for the

¹³⁹Hyam Maccoby, “George Steiner's Hitler: Of Theology & Politics,” *Encounter* 58, no. 5 (May 1982), 27-34: 34.

actual historical causes of anti-Semitism and of the Holocaust, *wie es eigentlich gewesen ist* [sic], and not hypostasise it into a metaphysical manifestation of an ineluctable fate.”¹⁴⁰ The approaches suggested by Maccoby and Steiner are direct contradictions of one another. The problem for Steiner, of course, is that the pragmatic historical studies suggested by Maccoby cannot access the deeper “instinctual” causes of antisemitism and of the Holocaust, which he believes exist in post-religious Western culture.

Steiner argues that just as we must approach a text with the assumption that its content is meaningful and accessible, we must employ this same “leap of faith” when trying to comprehend the meaning of the Shoah. While recognizing the unstable nature of human communication and the additional constraints put upon language by the human intellect and imagination, Steiner continues to argue that translation, or understanding, between languages, cultures, and human experience, is possible and should consistently be attempted. George Steiner is a remembrancer out of a sense of obligation -- a responsibility that comes with survival -- to remind the world that we still have not addressed the underlying causes and implications of murderous antisemitism, a hatred so powerful and so destructive that its progeny was Auschwitz.

Steiner’s dedication to the quest, however remote the possibility for success, for an adequate translation, an understanding, of the Shoah, is intricately linked to his self-defined status as “a kind of survivor”. Steiner did

¹⁴⁰ibid., 32.

not experience the Holocaust firsthand, but was among the fortunate few who left Europe before it was too late to do so. It is this element of chance which pre-occupies Steiner and provides him with a special connection to, and an intense identification with, the Shoah and its victims. Steiner admits that he cannot understand these two simultaneous orders of experience – his growing up safely in New York City while European Jews were being hunted and killed in his former home:

In the Warsaw ghetto a child wrote in its diary: 'I am hungry, I am cold; when I grow up I want to be a German, and then I shall no longer be hungry, and no longer be cold.' And now I want to write that sentence again: 'I am hungry, I am cold; when I grow up I want to be a German, and then I shall no longer be hungry, and no longer be cold.' And say it many times over, in prayer for the child, in prayer for myself. Because when that sentence was written I was fed, beyond my need, and slept warm, and was silent.¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹George Steiner, "Postscript," *George Steiner: A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press), 258.

CHAPTER FOUR

In Lieu of a Conclusion: The Enduring "Silence" of George Steiner

*In the beginning there was the Holocaust.
We must therefore start all over again....
What it was we may never know; but we
must proclaim, at least, that it was, that
it is.*

Elie Wiesel

At the very heart of the issue of Holocaust representation lies the fundamental problem of the nature of language and its ability to express human experience. In the book, *Admitting the Holocaust*, Lawrence Langer argues that Holocaust scholars' current focus on the issue of memory signals our entry into a second stage of Holocaust response, "moving from what we know of the event (the province of historians), to how to remember it, which shifts the responsibility to our own imaginations and what we are prepared to admit there."¹⁴² For over thirty years now, George Steiner has concerned himself with the issues of language and representation, paying increasing and particular attention to the unique interpretive problems posed by the Shoah. George Steiner's pioneering work is reflected in the growing discourse on Holocaust "memory", "memorialization", and "representation" among

¹⁴²Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust: Collected Essays*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

professional historians¹⁴³ and comparative literature specialists¹⁴⁴. However, little of the current scholarship on Holocaust representation recognizes his importance.

Lawrence Langer is one of two exceptions to this generalization. Langer attributes to Steiner, and to his book, *Language and Silence*:

the most searching analysis of [the impossibility of representing the Shoah], and though it is unlikely that he would still defend all of his premises and conclusions today, his ideas were so persuasively developed that, even where they failed to convince, they illuminated many of the issues that writers (like Celan) concerned with the reality of the Holocaust had to confront themselves. His conceptions are fruitful as formulations of the tensions that afflicted the artist despite the fact that they led Steiner himself to negative judgements on the possibility of an art of atrocity. For Steiner argues that the reality of the Holocaust addresses the contemporary mind most effectively with the authority of silence. His fundamental objection is appealing on emotional as well as intellectual grounds: 'The world of Auschwitz lies outside human speech as it lies outside reason.'¹⁴⁵

Yet Langer believes in the possibility of creating an "art of atrocity", and he points to the writing of survivors since the late 1950s as evidence of this possibility. The problem for these survivor-writers, according to Langer, was not the inadequacy of language, but their own literary inexperience and a reticence bred by the trauma of their survival.¹⁴⁶ Langer and Steiner are at odds over their

¹⁴³I am referring to the work of historians such as Saul Friedländer and Dominick LaCapra.

¹⁴⁴Scholars of English and Comparative Literature such as Geoffrey Hartman, James E. Young, Alvin Rosenfeld, Lawrence L. Langer, Sem Dresden, and Yael Feldman.

¹⁴⁵Lawrence Langer, *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 14-15.

¹⁴⁶*ibid.*, 16.

evaluation of the nature of human language. Indeed, most of Steiner's critics find his view of language, as an expressive structure with its own internal and independent vitality, suspect. In response to Steiner's comments on the debilitating effects that Nazi jargon has had on the German tongue¹⁴⁷, Langer states:

At the risk of oversimplification, perhaps it is worth emphasizing that language is in fact only a thing, without memory, perception, or conscience, a tool controlled by the carver in words, and when writers were prepared to employ it once again in the name of imaginative truth, the German language proved as adequate to the challenge as any other national idiom, limited only by the talent and resourcefulness of the 'carver'.¹⁴⁸

Langer agrees with Steiner that Auschwitz has presented a problem for the literary artist, but dismisses Steiner's argument in support of silence as "an intellectual formulation not borne out by the literary evidence."¹⁴⁹ Langer recognizes the challenge of the Holocaust in relation to the artist's *use* of language, but does not ascribe this same challenge to an internal limit within language itself. According to Langer, the literary artist is capable of discovering the resources within language to express his or her vision of the Shoah.¹⁵⁰ Steiner's work is based, according to Langer, on a serious misconception of the

¹⁴⁷See Steiner, "Hollow Miracle," *Reader*, 207-220.

¹⁴⁸Langer, *Literary Imagination*, 16.

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁵⁰Lawrence Langer's list of successful representations of the Holocaust, dating from the 1950s, is much longer and more inclusive than that of George Steiner. As major influences on his work, Langer cites Jean Améry's *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (*Beyond Guilt and Atonement*, translated into English many years later as *At the Mind's Limits*), Charlotte Delbo's *None of Us Will Return*, and the long list of oral testimonies of Holocaust survivors that he has been involved with at Yale University.

limits of human language. Langer rejects Steiner's theory of the boundedness of language and his resulting call for "silence" in relation to the Shoah. Langer points to the work of authors like Elie Wiesel, Jakov Lind, André Schwarz-Bart, Ilse Aichinger and Jerzy Kosinski as evidence of the inaccuracy of Steiner's assertions about the "impossibility" of speaking about the Shoah. As previously noted, Steiner has modified his initial conception of the need for total silence. Langer's focus on the absolute possibility of creating an "art of atrocity" blinds him to Steiner's concern for the survivors' *struggle* to represent their own experience of Nazi inhumanity in the absence of an adequate language of representation.

For Steiner, "Languages are living organisms. Infinitely complex, but organisms nevertheless. They have in them a certain life force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay and they can die."¹⁵¹ This difference of opinion among scholars of Holocaust representation over whether or not language has the capacity, or even the ability, to re-present the inhuman actions of the Shoah alienates many scholars from the work of George Steiner. Steiner's passionate understanding of language as the vessel of human grace and the prime carrier of both civilization and its opposite, nihilism, informs his thinking generally and cannot be separated from his thought on Holocaust representation.¹⁵²

The second, and most important, exception to the general absence of

¹⁵¹Steiner, "Hollow Miracle," *Reader*, 208.

¹⁵²*Ibid.*, 220.

reference to Steiner's thought in recent discussions of Holocaust representation is the work of the outstanding critic of Holocaust literature, Alvin Rosenfeld. Steiner is a central thinker for Rosenfeld, and provides him with a standard of literary and philosophical analysis at once aesthetic and ethical. Rosenfeld shares Steiner's most dominant concerns about the condition of language after the Shoah:

[My questions] centre, as will soon become evident, in problems of language, and more particularly in what is felt almost universally to be a crisis of language after the Holocaust. Given the silencing power of that event, how can language faithfully record history? Credibly describe the trials of living and dying under an extreme and dehumanizing terror? Express the presence or absence of God? Finally, and as a result of all the foregoing, how does it express its own diminishment and near demise? Other issues will loom larger to historians or psychologists of the Holocaust, but to literary scholars these begin to seem the most compelling and the most needful of study. 'At the origin, there is language,' as Edmond Jabès reminds us. But what about the end point: is language still *there*? After the Holocaust, that is a question that cannot be avoided....¹⁵³

In fact, Rosenfeld credits Steiner with providing the "ideal critical perspective" for his own examination of the vast body of Holocaust literature. He cites Steiner's argument:

These books and the documents that have survived are not for 'review.' Not unless 'review' signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a 'seeing-again,' over and over. As in some Borges fable, the only completely decent 'review' of the *Warsaw Diary* or of Elie Wiesel's *Night* would be to re-copy the book, line by line, pausing at the names of the dead and the names of the children as the orthodox scribe pauses, when recopying the Bible, at the hallowed name of God. Until we know many of the words by *heart* (knowledge deeper than mind) and can repeat a few at

¹⁵³Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 11.

the break of morning to remind ourselves that we live *after*....¹⁵⁴

The degree of respect and feeling that Steiner describes here is absolutely necessary, according to Rosenfeld, but is, at the same time, nearly impossible to sustain throughout an extended examination of the literature.¹⁵⁵ Again, Steiner is challenging his audience to re-evaluate the established critical stance it brings to literature, and to ask itself whether the same approach can, or should, be applied to Holocaust writing. In other words, as Jean-François Lyotard asked in his discussion of Auschwitz, how does one measure an earthquake which has destroyed all instruments of measurement?¹⁵⁶ Indeed, what possible scale of weights and measures could be used to evaluate the recorded experiences of Holocaust survivors? And do we even have the right to attempt their evaluation? Yet Steiner is himself critical of Holocaust literature in his isolation of a few select writers – Paul Celan in particular – who have conveyed what he considers to be the essence of the Shoah experience. Steiner's positive evaluation of these survivor-writers is based on their revolutionary use of a purified post-Holocaust language and their concomitant success at representing something of the essential Shoah experience.

Steiner's status as a philosopher of language, his stringent moral stance and his critical analysis of the Shoah make him unique among scholars of

¹⁵⁴George Steiner, "Postscript," *George Steiner : A Reader*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984): 258, quoted in Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 9.

¹⁵⁵Rosenfeld, *Double Dying*, 9.

¹⁵⁶Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 55-57.

language and the Holocaust. Yet even those who acknowledge the importance of Steiner's thought on the Shoah generally do not necessarily support his argument that permanent damage has been done to language by its implication in the construction and execution of the mass murder of European Jewry. The importance of Steiner and his work is not that he provides us with irrefutable answers, but that he raises new, difficult and potentially insightful questions which challenge both scholars and non-academic readers to confront the "dark places" in history, in society, and in themselves. Steiner is not sure "whether anyone, however scrupulous, who spends time and imaginative resources on these dark places, can, or indeed, ought to leave them personally intact. Yet the dark places are at the centre. Pass them by and there can be no serious discussion of the human potential."¹⁵⁷

Whether or not one agrees with Steiner, his analysis is appreciated for its ability to provoke thought. Edward W. Said, another contemporary critic of literature and culture, and an intellectual opponent of Steiner, demonstrates this unique appreciation many people have for Steiner's work:

Steiner is that rare thing, a critic propelled by diverse enthusiasms, a man able to understand the implications of trends in different fields, an autodidact for whom no subject is too arcane. Yet Steiner is to be read for his quirks, rather than in spite of them. He does not peddle a system nor a set of norms by which all things can be managed, every text decoded. He writes to be understood by nonspecialists, and his terms of reference come from his experience -- which is trilingual, eccentric, and highly urbane -- not from something as stable as doctrine or authority. This is the other side of his egotism: that he, George Steiner, conscientiously tries to register every response accurately, work through every difficulty, test every feeling,

¹⁵⁷Steiner, *Bluebeard's Castle*, 32.

authenticate each experience of the best that is known and thought. As such, then, the critic functions as a real if very unusual person, not an academic abstraction.¹⁵⁸

Steiner, legatee of central European Jewish secular humanism, is himself the quintessential humanist – his religion is expressed in his concern for humanity, and his Bible is the portable “*Torah*” of language. Steiner believes that as human beings we have, by definition, an obligation to obey a higher law of humaneness. He admits to suffering from the devouring addiction to thinking we can, always, do better.¹⁵⁹ Steiner eschews boundaries that separate us from one another, be they academic disciplines or national borders. We are each other’s guests on this crowded planet, according to Steiner, and for our potential as civilized human beings to survive we must develop more complex and more provisional loyalties and solidarities.¹⁶⁰

Steiner’s celebration of the humanities is, certainly, in honour of the learning they reflect. More importantly, that learning itself is the repository of values Steiner believes are invulnerable to time and indispensable to humanity. In his study of the work of several contemporary critics, Giles Gunn writes that, “To ‘religious’ critics like Steiner, the chief value of all interpretive or hermeneutic activity...is to reveal or disclose or uncover that fundamental oneness of human identity that underlies the otherwise superficial differences

¹⁵⁸*Contemporary Authors*, (1990), s.v. “George Steiner.”

¹⁵⁹Steiner, “Interviewed,” *Queen’s*, 846.

¹⁶⁰Steiner, “Kind of Survivor,” *Reader*, 232.

that separate human selves and societies.”¹⁶¹ Steiner is considered by Gunn to be a “religious critic” because his critical discourse increasingly defers, morally and rhetorically, to a transcendent authority. Steiner is not a religious believer, yet he has urged “a restoration of ethical standards in literary criticism [and] also a revival of the notion of religious transcendence on which he thinks they were formerly based. Such a recovery of the concept of transcendence will...[he hopes] possibly induce in readers an appropriate sense of piety towards [literature].”¹⁶² For Steiner, culture and religion are intricately linked where they contribute to our image of the human, and to our notion of humanity itself.¹⁶³ Steiner is inspired by our human creativity, our capacity for language, and our ability for insightful thought and creative invention. His “inner territory” houses this depth of feeling for humanity and a devoted faith in our potential as a species. Steiner’s humanism, compounded by his own personal history as “a kind of survivor”, produces a ceaseless sense of horror and disgust when faced with the Shoah and the interminable inhumanity that it unleashed not only on the Jewish people, but on humanity itself.

Steiner's outrage, however, is not limited to the crime of the Shoah. He is painfully aware that “history has granted us no armistice, no exemption from

¹⁶¹Giles Gunn, “On the New Uses of the ‘Secular’ and the ‘Religious’ in Contemporary Criticism: Edward Said, George Steiner, and the Counter-Example of Erich Heller” in *Morphologies of Faith: Essays in Religion and Culture in Honor of Nathan A. Scott, Jr.*, Mary Gerhart and Anthony C. Yu, eds. (Atlanta: Scholar’s Press, 1990), 54-55.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, 54.

the inhuman.”¹⁶⁴ The Cambodian “Killing Fields” are, for Steiner, a tragic example of the inhuman because of what the *Khmer Rouge* actually perpetrated there, *and* because, unlike the Shoah, the world watched it happen and made no attempt to try to stop it. A scenario, of what could, and should, have been, obsesses Steiner:

A number of nations, say Britain, France, the Soviet Union, the United States, but also Israel, would have taken note. They would have declared jointly that they would intervene to halt the massacres. Intervene immediately, massively. They would do so not because of any geopolitical motive or potential gain, not because right and wrong were clear to see in this south-east Asian imbroglio. No. They would intervene simply because no man or woman, getting up in the morning, should have to look in his or her mirror when other men and women are being buried alive, when the very visage of humanity is being defaced. Because, after Auschwitz and the Gulag, the status of humanity is too precarious to suffer blood-lust which can be halted, to bear with Pol Pot (or the genocides in Sri Lanka, or the methodical enslavement and genocide of the native peoples of Amazonia). A puerile scenario, isn't it? No one moved. Did you cry out in audible despair and resolution? Did I? And at this hour, it is western arms which are keeping the *Khmer Rouge* in business.¹⁶⁵

What seems to disturb Steiner most about the Shoah is that we still do not understand exactly how and why this horror could not simply occur, but flourish among human beings. Surely the world should come to a halt when so

¹⁶⁴Steiner, “Remembering,” *Theology*, 440.

¹⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 441. It is only appropriate to ask whether humanity has become desensitized to violence, cruelty, abuse -- even mass murder? We have again watched, on television, the genocide in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda, and again no one has effectively intervened on the part of humanity. As we are increasingly weaned on an *entertainment* industry that parades molested children, rape victims, tortured and murdered human bodies in an endless, nameless chorus line of “life in the 1990s”, humanity’s threshold for barbarism is at an all-time high. Isn’t this situation breeding a dangerous lack of humanity and its main ingredient – empathy? Our capacity for inhumanity did not exhaust itself through the terrible totality of the Shoah, but somehow seems to have survived and even to have gained strength from the experience. The Shoah can be seen to be a kind of contagion, infecting other areas of space and time, acting as a prototype for other barbarous acts perpetrated against humanity.

heinous a crime is perpetrated upon a people; certainly, God should leave heaven, refusing to allow such inhumanity on the earth between the human beings that He created. But the world, neither then nor after, did not stop, did not collapse under the weight of this inhumanity.

The Shoah has barely been acknowledged in many parts of the world, and today the fact of its very existence is under attack by antisemitic "revisionists". Steiner is terrified that the historical and moral specificity of the Shoah will continue to pass into the general category of human crime, "man's inhumanity to man" or, worse yet, will be dismissed as an unfortunate accident of history. To forget the absolute destruction of European-Jewish civilization, the suffering of its entire Jewish population, and the actual *extermination* of six million innocent souls is, for Steiner, a double annihilation. Steiner argues that the Shoah, which has permanently defiled our humanity, must not be allowed to be assimilated into history, by description in the banal language of ordinary life, as only one more example in the long line of human transgressions. Steiner's concerns explain the insistent quality and the sense of urgency with which he writes about the Shoah, demonstrating that we still have not recognized that the Shoah implicates, not simply the German people and the collaborators and bystanders, but human beings as a species -- all of us insofar as we share a joint capacity for goodness and for evil. Steiner realizes that we must, as human beings, create, sustain, and protect our own humane reality -- there is no one to intervene on our behalf. It is up to us, collectively and as individuals, to lower our toleration for acts of inhumanity and for the words which enact them.

Similarly, in our attempts to represent the Shoah, we are individually responsible for how we choose to employ language in our discussions. Steiner argues that language is not a “tool”, a neutral instrument of literature, social science, or history; it is a human construction, with its own life-force, reflective of culture in its ability to both affect and be affected by moral and political values. Steiner’s thought on the meaning and implications of the Shoah is itself an act of conscience, necessary to challenge readers to attain a higher standard of ethical understanding through a deepened analysis of language and human motivation. As a reflection of humane conscience, Steiner’s writing resembles Kafka’s vision of true literature as a book which “acts as an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us.”¹⁶⁶ Like Wiesel and other prophetic Jewish writers, Steiner “cries aloud from the wilderness created by the Holocaust to all humanity, imploring us to become more cognizant of the past before humanity’s future is forfeit.”¹⁶⁷

After the horrific nightmare of the Holocaust, we are left alone, with only the memories of a once-vibrant thousand-year-old Eastern and Central European Jewish culture – a culture that contributed, out of all proportion to the relative smallness of its own population, to the highest accomplishments of Western culture and civilization. Amid the record of its total annihilation, as told by documents and survivors, Elie Wiesel reminds us of what was lost:

These innumerable cities and villages where ten generations of Jews had sanctified their exile through study and prayer – they are

¹⁶⁶Rosenfeld, *Double Dying*, 18.

¹⁶⁷Simon P. Sibelman, *Silence in the Novels of Elie Wiesel*. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 2.

gone. For good. Erased from geography. The shtetl -- this small kingdom of fire, erected and purified in fire -- has disappeared. Forever. Nowadays we have Jewish cities, capitals, settlements, suburbs, and even military bases. But we don't have the shtetl -- and never will. It is swallowed up by smoke and night, along with its sages and their pupils, its preachers and their followers, its dreamers and their dreams. Here, the hangman's victory seems final. Wiped out for good, the shtetl can be found only in words, in words alone...¹⁶⁸

We are now the sole custodians of this world, of its once dynamic Jewish life and of its final story of sorrow and destruction. In his role as critic and remembrancer, George Steiner reminds us that we too are legatees, that history has placed the responsibility upon us, here after the Shoah, to determine how we will infuse these words with meaning, with empathy, with respect, and -- yes, when appropriate -- even with silence.

¹⁶⁸Elie Wiesel, "Art and Culture After the Holocaust," in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust*, Eva Fleischner, ed. (New York: KTAV, 1974), 441.

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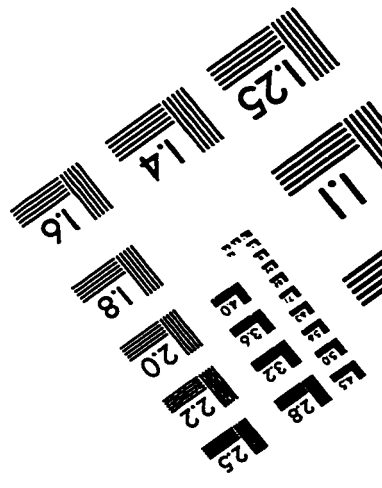
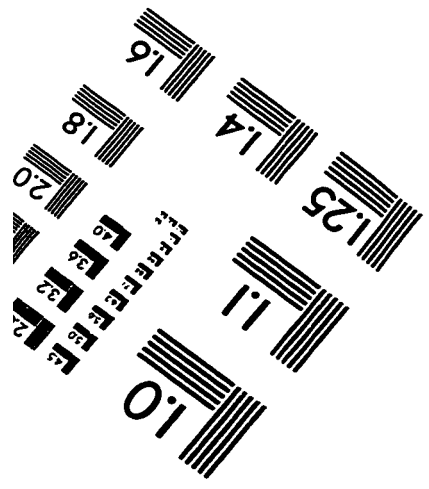
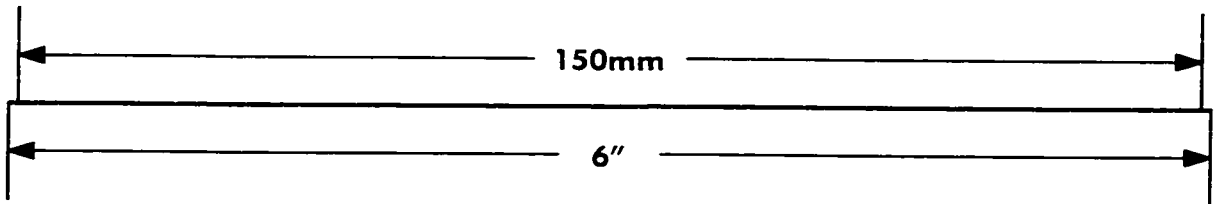
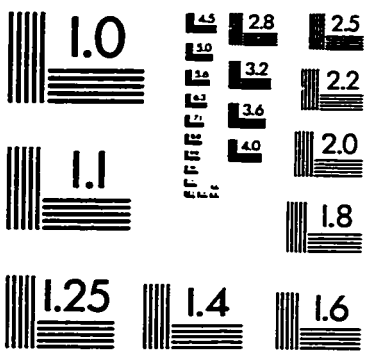
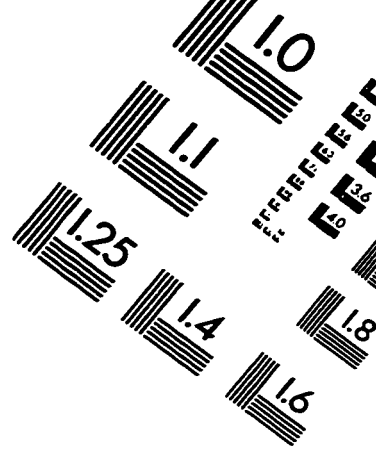
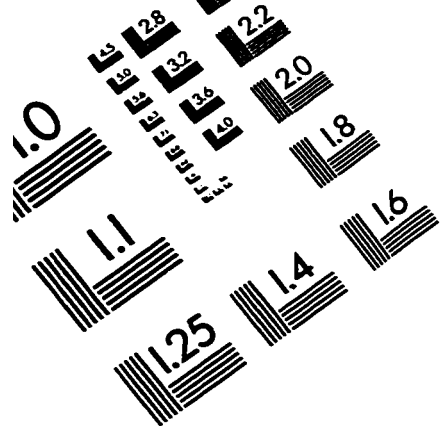
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