

JEWISH LITERATURE FROM THE FRINGES

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Layton, Irving A Wild Peculiar Joy: Selected Poems McClelland & Stewart, 1989)

Wiseman, Adele Crackpot  
The Sacrifice

Cohen, Leonard Book Of Mercy McClelland & Stewart, 1986)

Richler, Mordecai St. Urbain's Horseman

Brazil

Lispector, Clarice The Stream Of Life (Univ of Minnesota, 1989)  
Soulstorm (New Directions, 1974)

Italy

Segre, Dan Vittorio Memoirs Of A Fortunate Jew (Laurel, 1985)

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Kenaz, Yehoshua The Way To The Cats (Steerforth Press, 1991)

Kaniuk, Yoram Confessions Of A Good Arab (Braziller, 1988)

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THE JERUSALEM POST

## Steiner at seventy

By MORDECHAI BECK

(November 11) -- For many 70-year-olds, a major fear is the loss of memory. George Steiner, who reached retirement age at Cambridge University during this past academic year, may share these fears, but for far more global reasons. --

On a short visit to Israel last week, to give a lecture at Tel Aviv University on "The People of the Book," he stressed how much the Jewish genius is tied to its memory - written and oral.

"I remember staying at the house of Nadine Gordimer in South Africa, and meeting with leaders of the underground against apartheid. When I asked them why they had been so ineffective, one of the leaders of the group arose and declared: 'No people in Africa ever had a book!' It was as if they had intuited that the secret of Jewish survival was tied up with a text."

Steiner subscribes to this doctrine, but is quick to point that in order to survive and nourish a people, the book has to be a living text, which is to say both written and oral.

"One of the reasons the Jews are so prominent in the school of deconstruction," he suggested at the lecture, "is - to use psychoanalytical language - an Oedipal revolt against the Christian focus on logos - the word. This was never sufficient for the Jewish sages"

Earlier on, when we met at Jerusalem's American Colony Hotel, he elaborated on this theme: "In numerous concentration camps there were men who knew the written and oral Torah by heart. Other inmates came to them to 'look them up,' to ask them questions, from their memory. At the edge of the gas chambers, they would be discussing the minutiae of the oral tradition! If a human being is a living book, he is indestructible. He carries inside him a power, he knows who he is and where he's from, and even death cannot

knows who he is and where he's from, and even death cannot abolish that. To 'look up' in German is *bletter*, turning the page - to be a living reference work. And this is something that moves me enormously. Today this type of knowledge is confined to classical traditions inside Judaism, among the Moslems who teach Koran, and in the great Oriental disciplines."

Repeating one of the themes of a recent essay, he added: "Contemporary man can no longer quote from classics - Hellenistic or Hebraic. Fundamentalists, who are apt to quote scripture, are often intolerant and aggressive, but they at least know that making a million dollars is not man's highest goal. They know that study is one of the dignities of the human spirit.

"What really terrifies me is the great emptiness of mass media, and the destruction of memory, alongside the systematic destruction of the arts. It is quite correct that a computer data bank has one million more 'memories' than you or I, and that in theory if you want to know something, you can look it up at the press of a button. But that is no answer. We are made by our memories, this is our identity. Without using the capacity of the human brain to store up and use actively, we will end up with a culture which is banal, a culture of vulgar immediacy."

Steiner, who is now professor emeritus at Cambridge University, where he lives with his wife Zara, also a professor, has spent his whole professional life as a teacher of literary texts. A teacher he describes ideally as "a waker of memories," and it is this that he feels is in danger of being wiped out by the modern world. But it is not just a question of memory, it is also one of content and of curiosity: "If an important writer or thinker says, 'I'm an atheist, there is no God, it's childish nonsense, as Freud and Nietzsche showed us,' I take my hat off to him. If a person says, 'I'm a religious believer. I can't live without faith,' I take my hat off to him, too. What worries me is this: Are we moving into a period where the question of God's existence - or nonexistence - is no longer asked, because it is unimportant, or is regarded as archaic nonsense? That great ex-communist intellectual, Malraux, said that the next century will either be religious, or it won't be.

"Now how you answer this metaphysical question, I do not say. But just consider the rarity of great atheistic art. The great Italian poet Leopardi was probably a total atheist; there have been others, but they are remarkably few. Maybe now they will come. By contrast, the literary giants of our time - Kafka, Mann, Proust, Solzhenitsyn, Pasternak - are people for whom the question was enormously important, even if they related to it in the negative form - of Deus abscondus. But once you say that the question is nonsense, or let us forget about it and play the stock market, then I don't believe that certain forms or dimensions in music, art, and literature are possible.

"In Israeli literature, too, for writers like Agnon, Amichai or David Grossman, this was, and still is, a living question. If it's a dead question, we're in trouble."

At the very center of Steiner's world-view is the most tragic of paradoxes. Not only that "the Holocaust did not happen in the Gobi desert, but in the heartland of European sophistication, in lands that had produced Beethoven and Goethe, but that the liberal tradition that had sprung up there was powerless to prevent the rise of Nazism."

As a teacher of humanistic texts, he is painfully aware of this situation and talks as though the humanities are fighting a losing battle: "It is much easier to be a scientist today. The escalator is going up the whole time. To be a humanist, particularly a secular humanist, is enormously difficult. In all my books, I have tried to show that humanism did not help when horror came. If you were to ask what is the great sadness in my life as a teacher, I can answer: When I began, you could join the Communist Party, or be a Marxist, or even a Fascist. In all of these doctrines, there was a contract, a hope, a promise. In my last 10 or 15 years as a teacher, I have discovered that the young possess an ironic maturity we did not have.

"I remember clearly having a tutorial in Cambridge at the time of the Contra rebellion in Nicaragua. I said to my students: 'Some of you are the children, or grandchildren, of young men who went to fight in Spain. Are any of you thinking of going to Nicaragua?'

"Now the way they respond in England is very polite. They wrote me a letter: 'Dear Dr. Steiner, if we go for the rebels we will die for a filthy future state run by Stalinists, if we fight for the other side, we will die for a filthy future state run by the CIA. We are not going to be fooled again.'

"It's horrible to be so intelligent so early. If you take from the young the possibility of creative error, what do we leave them with? If at 18 you know there is nothing to strive for, except to make a million dollars in the City and join Mr Gates, then we have failed as teachers, and that haunts me very deeply. I ask myself: What will we have handed on that will make the next generation creatively mistaken? It's the only way. And there I feel we have failed."