

The Wounds of Possibility

The Wounds of Possibility:
Essays on George Steiner

Edited by

Ricardo Gil Soeiro

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P U B L I S H I N G

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Essays on George Steiner,
Edited by Ricardo Gil Soeiro

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“We have no more beginnings. *Incipit*: that proud Latin word which signals the start survives in our dusty ‘inception’. The medieval scribe marks the opening line, the new chapter with an illuminated capital. In its golden or carmine vortex the illuminator of manuscripts sets heraldic beasts, dragons at morning, singers and prophets. The initial, where this term signifies beginning and primacy, acts as a fanfare. It declares Plato’s maxim – by no means self-evident – whereby in all things natural and human, the origin is the most excellent. Today, in western orientations – observe the muted presence of morning light in that word – the reflexes, the turns of perception, are those of afternoon, of twilight. (I am generalizing. My argument, throughout, is vulnerable and open to what Kierkegaard called ‘the wounds of possibility.’)”

—George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*

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1.

INTRODUCTION: THE WOUNDS OF POSSIBILITY

RICARDO GIL SOEIRO

Bringing together writers, translators, poets, and leading scholars of cultural theory, literary theory, comparative literature, philosophy, history, political science, music studies, or education, *The Wounds of Possibility* aims at offering an in-depth and wide-ranging study of George Steiner's imposing body of work.

With polymathic virtuosity which extends across the range of the Humanities, Steiner's remarkable work has always invited us to keep open the 'wounds of possibility' (Kierkegaard's incandescent phrase which sets the tone for the volume and which Steiner profusely reiterates). His writings represent a notable instance of transdisciplinary criticism: from his comparative study on Tolstoy and Dostoevsky to his passionate plea that we risk 'a wager on transcendence' (*Real Presences*), from his study of why Agamemnon's shadow has ceased to cover us (*The Death of Tragedy*) to the posing of the question of why a handful of ancient Greek myths continue to give vital shape to our sense of self and of the world (*Antigones*), from his devotion to the harvest of Babel (*After Babel*) and from the reciprocal relationship between language and silence, to his musings on the ten possible reasons for the sadness of thought – Steiner's 'extra-territorial' accomplishments in criticism, in theory of literature, in philosophy, in linguistics, and in translation studies, have built theoretical bridges, crossed cultural boundaries, and connected intellectual worlds, but they also made him a kind of thought-provoking *enfant terrible*, a polemic and a controversial *écrivain infrequentable* in Juan Asensio's telling phrase. Although haunted by a post-Auschwitz Jewishness that informs his tragic reading of man, his work remains nevertheless committed to an unrelenting quest for a "poetics of meaning" embedded in his assessment

of the hermeneutic act, and in so doing the ‘no one’s rose’ (Paul Celan) is unexpectedly illuminated by the “grammar of hope” implicit in his unique conception of reading. Against the deconstruction of Derrida, who wishes to undo “logocentrism” and to send the Word into the exile of writing, Steiner (who has long been enamoured of the shining splendour of Heidegger’s talk of Being) will choose to argue in *Real Presences* that “Where we read truly, where the experience is to be that of meaning, we do so as if the text (the piece of music, the work of art) *incarnates a real presence of significant being*”, further adding that the wager on the meaning of meaning is a wager on transcendence.

Throughout these last thirty years, George Steiner’s work has been deeply studied. In 1993, under the editorial guidance of Eckhard Nordhofen, the German journal *Zeitschrift für Didaktik der Philosophie*, published in Hannover, was entirely devoted to Steiner’s work. Soon after, in 1994, the major rendering of Steiner’s work came to being with the superb volume *Reading George Steiner*, supervised by Nathan A. Scott, Jr. and Ronald A. Sharp (this volume features key contemporary thinkers such as Gerhard Neumann, Graham Ward, Edith Wyschogrod, Ruth Padel, Robert Boyers, and Mark Krupnick). Six years after, in 2000, Mexican writer Adolfo Castañón published *Lectura y Catarsis: Tres Papeles sobre George Steiner seguidos de un Ensayo Bibliografico y de una Hemerografía del Autor* (Ediciones Casa Juan Pablos, Ediciones Sin Nombre), and in 2001, the French writer Juan Asensio published his important book *Essai sur l’Oeuvre de George Steiner. La parole souffle sur notre poussière*, in which an engaged reading of the topic of evil in Steiner’s vision is rendered. In 2003, Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat organized the important collection of essays on Steiner for the prestigious and influential *Cahiers de l’Herne*, in which several collaborators took part, namely Claudio Magris, Alexis Philonenko, Roger Scruton, Moshe Idel, Olivier Mongin, Juan Asensio, Marc Ruggeri, David Banon, Stephen Greenblatt, and Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat himself, who was also in charge of *Le Magazine Littéraire* n° 454, *George Steiner. La Culture contre la Barbarie* (June 2006), which was entirely devoted to Steiner. In November 2008, two Italian researchers, S. Raimondi and G. Scaramuzza, organized the collective volume *La parola in udienza: Paul Celan e George Steiner* (Milan, Cuem) which features stimulating readings on these two important writers. In 2009, I published *Iminência do Encontro* (Roma Editora), *A Alegria do Sim na Tristeza do Finito* (Apenas Livros Editora), *Gramática da Esperança* (Vega Editora), and *O Pensamento Tornado Dança* (Roma Editora) which was the first Portuguese collective collection of essays on Steiner’s work. Also in 2009, Antoni Bosch-Vician organized the volume

Lectura, Tradició i Vida Filosòfica. A Propòsit de George Steiner (Barcelona, PPU).

In 2010, the book *Avec George Steiner. Les Chemins de la Culture* (Paris, Albin Michel) was published, bringing in concert the lectures delivered at the first international colloquium on Steiner, *George Steiner, philosophe de la culture et de la transmission* (Nantes: Université de Nantes, France, June 2009), which was soon followed by the international colloquium *Da Condição Humana: A partir de António Damásio, Espinoza, George Steiner e Miguel Torga* (Viseu, Instituto Piaget, Portugal, November 2009); one year before, in 2008, the seminar *Lectura, Tradició i Vida Filosòfica. A Propòsit de George Steiner* had taken place at the Universidad Ramon Llull (Barcelona), 6 and 13 March 2008. Finally, in 2011, Catherine Chatterley published one of the most comprehensive accounts of Steiner's influential oeuvre - *Disenchantment: George Steiner and the Meaning of Western Civilization After Auschwitz* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press).

Despite a somewhat baffling resistance to Steiner's work, it has been clear that the academic research has chosen Steiner's body of work as its subject matter for academic theses, namely (in chronological order): Nancy Martin Bailey (1985), *George Steiner's Concept of Culture: its significance for education* (MA thesis presented to the University of Illinois, Urbana), Jan Timmerman (1987), *George Steiner: Sprachphilosoph en Kulturkritiker tussen Athene en Auschwitz* (Graduate thesis presented to the Faculteit Letteren en Wijsbegeerte, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), Saranne Magennis (1987), *George Steiner: A Study of the Educational Relevance of His Literary and Philosophic Thought* (MA thesis in Education presented to the Trinity College, Dublin), Alejandro Bayer Tamayo (1996), *La Obra de George Steiner. La Lectura de l'Homme* (PhD thesis presented to the Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain), Jaroslaw Buchholz (1998), *L'Art, chemin d'éternité pour l'homme. Un essai théologique à partir de George Steiner* (Phd thesis presented to the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven), John Keith Hyde (1998), *Two-Story Building Narrative Transformation in Erich Auerbach, Stephen Crites, and George Steiner* (MA thesis in Christian Studies to the Regent College, Vancouver), Jennifer Eileen Harris (2000), *Flowers of Grace: A Philosophical Study of 'Real Presences' by George Steiner* (Phd thesis in Philosophy presented to the University of Toronto, Canada), Susanne Matsudo-Kiliani (2004), *Sprache-Verstehen-Übersetzen. Der Übersetzungsbegriff George Steiners* (Phd thesis presented to the University of Heidelberg), Hans-Holger Malcomeß (2005), *Primäre Gesalt und Sekundärer Diskurs. Die Diskussion des Authentischen Ausgehend von George Steiner* (M.A. thesis presented to the

Technische Universität Dresden (Fakultät für Sprach-, Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften, Institut für Germanistik), Juan Pedro Maldonado Isla (2007), *Las Fronteras del Lenguaje en el Pensamiento de George Steiner* (PhD thesis in Philosophy presented to the Università della Santa Croce, Rome), Catherine Chatterley (2007), *Disenchantment: A Critical Study of George Steiner's Thought on the Holocaust, Antisemitism, and Western Culture* (PhD thesis in History presented to the University of Chicago), Jeroen Vanheste (2007), *De cultuurkritiek van Eliot, Scruton en Steiner* (Phd thesis presented to the Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen, the Netherlands), and my own *Iminência do Encontro: George Steiner e a Leitura Responsável* (2009), Phd thesis in Literary Studies presented to the University of Lisbon, Portugal.

The present volume is neatly divided into five sections: the first section “The Wounds of Being” is devoted to the topics of Poetics, Hermeneutics, and Culture; the second section focuses on the topics of Literature, Language, and Education whilst the third one focuses on the topics of Literature, Culture, and the Holocaust; the fourth section tries to deal with the complex relationship between music and transcendence; finally, the collection ends with three interviews conducted by Nuccio Ordine and with one essay written by George Steiner. Devised with the purpose of providing ample information on Steiner, the volume also includes an extensive bibliography which may be of great benefit to any scholarly research on this area.

After the opening piece, “Translation” (a beautiful poem by Ruth Papel dedicated to Steiner), in “»The Long Day’s Journey of the Saturday«: George Steiner’s *Real Presences* and the »Middle Space«”, Christopher Knight tries to make manifest the ambiguities of Steiner’s movement towards what Charles Taylor calls, in *A Secular Age* (2007), ‘the middle space.’ Drawing upon Taylor’s and Theodore Ziolkowski’s theoretical frameworks, Knight situates *Real Presences* (1989) in that divided dimension which Taylor calls the middle space.

In “Aristotle and Thomas of Aquinas in George Steiner: Poetics and Metaphysics”, Armando Pego links the figure of Thomas of Aquinas by Steiner to the central role played by Dante’s *Commedia* in Western literature. Pego follows the Aristotelian traces in order to see how Steiner’s metaphysical postulates give way to a poetics which is at the same time informed by a Heideggerian background and a vindication of a theological scope (in the vein of Jacques Maritain and Hans Urs von Balthasar). To do so, he draws upon key passages from the Book Four of *Metaphysics*, *On Interpretation*, and the incipit of *Poetics*, so as to illustrate the complex

ways in which Steiner's wager on transcendence opens itself to an aesthetical perception of Being.

In the essay "Grammar of Hope", focusing primarily on Steiner's *Real Presences* (1989) and Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (1987), I try to come to an understanding of the relationship between Steiner's hermeneutics of transcendence and John Caputo's radical hermeneutics. Faced with the XXth century inhumanity, whose ineffaceable stain was the experience of barbarism as it hit the highest point of horror in Auschwitz, Steiner seems to be embracing the most radical move in hermeneutics, and he does so by wagering on transcendence, in which the meaning of meaning peacefully rests on the arms of God, thus rejecting the negative semiotics of Derrida. However, when looked upon by the demanding eye of radical hermeneutics put forth by Caputo, Steinerian hermeneutics soon reveals itself in alliance with a metaphysics of presence and a philosophical thought which holds back the free play of difference. Whereas Steiner seeks 'the meaning of Meaning', John Caputo, one of America's most respected and controversial continental thinkers, has been both braced and terrified by Friedrich Nietzsche's demand to take the truth straight up, forgoing the need to have it 'attenuated, veiled, sweetened, blunted and falsified,' readily confessing that we have not been handpicked to be Being's or God's mouthpiece, that it is always necessary to get a reading, even if (and precisely because) the reading is there is no Reading, no final game-ending Meaning, no decisive and sweeping Story that wraps things up. Even if the secret is, there is no Secret. 'We do not know who we are – that is who we are.'

By stressing the complex, ambiguous, and paradoxical dimension of Steiner's work, in "George Steiner au coeur du mystère chrétien?", Juan Asensio tries to examine Steiner's position towards Christianity. Firstly, Asensio alludes to the fundamental paradox at play in Steiner's work (one which he is powerless to resolve), namely: how can one make a wager on the real presence of art if, according to the statement that Nietzsche put into the mouth of the "madman" in *The Gay Science*, God is dead? Keeping in mind this crucial contradiction, Asensio pursues the intimate interpenetration, in Steiner's view, between Auschwitz and Golgotha, arguing that the author of *In Bluebeard's Castle* proceeds ever so cautiously into this heart of darkness, a journey which remains overlooked and unthought within the Christian theology - indeed barely glimpsed by the work of such an author as Donald MacKinnon.

In "Person: a Pending Subject for Steiner?", Juan Pedro Maldonado Isla offers us a invaluable insight into some of Steiner's unanswered questions. By exploring the Personalist Philosophy of authors like Mounier, Marcel,

Lévinas, or Buber, Maldonado intends to promote a fruitful and much-needed dialogue between the call of the text and the call of the Other. In such a dialogue, the hermeneutical stance of the mystery of the real presence would be consistent with the ethical stance of a concrete philosophy of dialogue, bridging thus the gulf of solipsism implicit in the act of reading by anchoring a somewhat abstract meaning of meaning to a more concrete and existential approach which would produce a pregnant reciprocity of intersubjectivity, a veritable openness toward each other.

In “Steiner’s ‘False Dilemmas’ and Paul Ricoeur’s Philosophy of Mediation”, Jennifer Harris proposes an informed reading of Steiner’s wager of transcendence put forward in *Real Presences*. In Harris’ view, *Real Presences* represents Steiner’s refusal to forget, i.e. a passionate *in memoriam*. Even if this is the age of epilogue, where the “covenant” between word and world has been broken, Steiner wagers on the existence of God as the ultimate guarantor of the grammar of the world. However, Harris believes Steiner’s wager to be flawed in the sense that his understanding of presence is excessively indebted to Heidegger, whose own philosophy of presence is drawn from early Greek thinking, thus pointing to a different approach of “transcendence”, that is, a Hebrew and Christian perspective which allows us to discover an active, dynamic presence which stands in contrast to the passive, God-in-waiting of Heidegger and the Greeks. Paul Ricoeur’s theory of the ‘mediation of meaning’ would act as an antidote to the ‘ruinous dichotomy’ between presence and absence: in the renewed theoretical framework, meaning would, thus, emerge as a possible ‘world’ of being.

In “A Meaningful Wager”, Anthony C. Yu offers us a clear assessment of Steiner’s *Real Presence*. Presenting a clearly positive appraisal, *Real Presences* is here depicted as being a real *tour de force*, an urgent and personal statement. Autobiographically engaged, deeply felt, passionately argued, and revealing, these are the qualities ascribed to Steiner’s 1989 book on the meaning of meaning. While providing a comprehensive and lucid overview of the book’s content, Yu also elaborates more specifically on the trust that fosters a sense of answerability, a sense of responsible responsiveness that Steiner draws on the concept of ‘cortesia’. Whilst predicting less positive reviews, Yu nevertheless is confident that *Real Presences* is successful in generating a lively debate amongst both its critics and acolytes alike. In his own words: ‘For an embattled prophet, the ancient message might still be forthcoming: there are seven thousand whose knees have not bowed to Baal.’

The second section, “Poetics of the Unwritten”, is introduced by Alberto Manguel’s essay. In “Sins of Omission: George Steiner’s Unwritten

Books”, Manguel examines Steiner’s book *My Unwritten Books* (2008), in which he tells of seven books he did not write. Each of the seven chapters are viewed by Manguel as a lucid map of rich and stimulating research possibilities, ranging from the torment of the gifted when they live among the very great, the experience of sex in different languages, a love for animals greater than for human beings, the costly privilege of exile, and a theology of emptiness. *My Unwritten Books* is, thus, seen not as a compendium of wishful thinking, but rather as a thoughtful cartography of an active shadow, of one of the journeys not taken.

In “Los Libros que George Steiner no Escribió”, Adolfo Castañón perceives in the work *My Unwritten Books* an extension of Steiner’s process of intellectual autobiography, initiated with *Errata* (1997) and which was subsequently continued with *Lessons of the Masters* (2003). In his perspective, this is a book made up of sketches of books, of interrupted essays to evoke the imagery used by Walter Benjamin, much like *The Arcades Project*, which was equally a work in process; they are fictions, that is to say imaginary truths, which give us the opportunity to ‘fail better’ (the adagio that Steiner takes from Samuel Beckett when discussing his unwritten books and that the reader will come across when reading part V of the present collection).

In “Las Principales Enseñanzas de George Steiner”, Alejandro Bayer Tamayo generously tries to pay Steiner a debt of love, echoing *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky’s* scintillating *dictum*. In order to achieve this poignant purpose, he puts forward what he considers to be Steiner’s most significant teachings. While there are too many thought-provoking topics to mention here, which will surely deserve further critical attention by the attentive reader, Tamayo’s essay succeeds admirably in carrying out what he sets out to do, namely an examination of the inner story of Steiner’s work. Firstly, he thematises the profoundly personal dimension of the experience of meaning, of an amorous response to what so intimately moves us. It is this desire to communicate, it is this irrefutable will to meet the Other in all its singularity which, according to Tamayo, is the starting point of books such as *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, *The Death of Tragedy*, *Antigones*, *Language and Silence*, *Extraterritorial*, *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, *No Passion Spent*, *George Steiner at the New Yorker*, or even different types of works such as *Homer: a collection of critical essays* and *Heidegger*. Closely connected to this creative answerability and deep-seated instinct of communion, the co-implication of man and language is equally a vital topic to be highlighted. And this is emphasized in such a forceful way that the retreat of the Word can be here equated with the crisis of the humane. Secondly, it is the concept of reading, of the *lecture bien faite* (Péguy’s

phrase), which is wisely explored by Tamayo. In fact, he develops highly original analyses of its chosen texts, fruitfully reexamining pivotal literary and philosophical issues on which Steiner has always dwelt: the risky dimension which pertains to the hermeneutic act, the moral dimension of reading, the importance of teaching, the logocentric overtones of *Real Presences* (a feature also present in the article “The logocrats” on De Maistre, Heidegger, and Boutang), and the wager on transcendence which sets Steiner apart from the more nihilistic facet of postmodernism.

In “Steiner as an educator: a challenge to the old critic”, Saranne Magennis reflects upon the nature of the educator and Steiner’s embodiment of that role. It challenges directly Steiner’s statement, made in *Errata*, that he has wasted his strengths and argues rather that his “almost embarrassing passion for teaching”, combined with his fidelity to the “old criticism”, has led him to make an irreplaceable contribution to the literary, philosophical, and cultural world of his times. In illuminating the past, questioning the present, and scattering the seeds of interest among his readers and students, he has opened the way for others to learn, to cultivate ideas, and to grow as readers and as human beings. Magennis identifies three topics which will draw her attention, namely: Steiner’s role in holding in focus for the contemporary world of the heritage of European literature and philosophy in a post-cultural context against the multiple pressures of economic and technological development; his understanding, illumination, and mediation of the complexity of human life and culture and, finally, his commitment to fragile reason and to love that is beyond reason.

In “George Steiner’s Jewish Problem”, Assaf Sagiv tackles the thorny issue of Steiner’s Jewishness. Similarly to a number of post-Holocaust thinkers (namely, Edmond Jabès, Jean-François Lyotard, or Zygmunt Bauman, to name but a few), Steiner advocates the figure of the archetypal wandering Jew in an unattainable quest for Ithaca. Steiner is, therefore, praising the erratic and exilic condition of the Jewish worldview – a panegyric already written by Hermann Cohen and Franz Rosenzweig. His view of Jewish identity rests on a cosmopolitan ideal and in a deep-seated belief rooted on an universal consciousness which blurs particular barriers – hence, Steiner’s demarcation from the more isolationist elements of Jewish tradition and his contention that such tendencies (Zionism, in particular) undermine some of the most distinctive features of Judaism. Throughout the essay, Sagiv offers a different and critical reading of Steiner’s position, arguing that Steiner’s observations on Judaism approach their subject from a distance, reflecting a surprising degree of alienation from the Jewish tradition itself (the essay is followed by G. Steiner’s brief response).

In “George Steiner and the Theology of Culture”, Graham Ward argues that Steiner’s analysis of culture has always been deeply theological. To support this argument, he goes to great pains to trace in detail the complex trajectory of Steiner’s intellectual journey. By resorting to seminal essays such as “Silence and the Poet”, “The Retreat from the Word”, and “Schoenberg’s *Moses and Aaron*” (all included in the collection *Language and Silence*), Ward begins by thematizing key topics within the Steinerian *forma mentis*, namely the pervading theme of silence. Steiner is situated between two conflicting positions: the first one is nihilistic and the other is theological. It is the contradiction between Steiner’s espousal of logocentrism and the menacing possibility of a real absence in the ‘real presence’ (a possibility which silently haunts *Antigones*) that gives rise to what Ward considers to be the constitutive ambivalence of Steiner’s later work (an irresolution also noticeable in his monograph on Heidegger and in the decisive essay “‘Critic’/‘Reader’”). Stressing that Steiner’s polemic against postmodernism and deconstruction is shot through ambivalences, the author provides a careful discussion of the six stages in which *Real Presences* unfolds. However, in concluding his essay, Ward comes back to his real focal point, the heart of his essay, namely the interstice between no word and every word, a paradox noticeably patent in the conclusions of both *After Babel* and *Real Presences*.

In “The Magical Museum of Reality: George Steiner and the Arts”, Donatien Grau presents a fiercely stimulating and original analysis of Steiner’s relation to the visual arts. Presented by the author as a kind of a “Reading against George Steiner”, Grau’s text traces the intricate ways in which the present of the visual arts find a particular place in Steinerian criticism. Apart from drawing an interesting parallel between Steiner and Marcel Duchamp, the author contends that an almost tacit dialogue has been taking place between Steiner and the worlds of arts. To support his argument, he mentions not only the numerous texts Steiner has so profusely written for several catalogues, but also some of his most famous essays which revolve, in one way or another, around the field of visual arts, namely “The Cleric of Treason” which hints at the reception of works by Claude Lorrain and Nicolas Poussin (ample evidence is provided: e.g. Kenneth Clark, Benvenuto Cellini, Aby Warburg, Rembrandt, and Michael Levey). Some light is also shed on Steiner’s *modus operandi* in which a visual work is a creative stimulus to think deeper or, reversely, to confirm a line of thought: “Uncommon Reader” (to Grau not merely a rhetorical *incipit*, but rather a symbol) is a case in point (in this respect, one is reminded of other striking examples, namely: Aristotle’s painting *Contemplating a Bust of Homer*, analysed by Paul Ricoeur, Giorgio di

Chirico's *The Song of Love*, scrutinised by Richard Wolin, and most notably Klee's *Angelus Novus* through benjaminian lenses). Quite aptly describing Steiner as the "critic of interrogative epiphanies", Grau convincingly puts forward the hypothesis according to which Steiner's relation to the visual arts finds its roots in his overriding concept of "grammar of creation".

"George Steiner on Narrative and Novel: Philosophy of History and the Theological Point of View", by Barnaba Maj, is an essay of solid scholarship with an impressive range of references. The essay opens up with a poetic and theoretic constellation which, in his telling, is instrumental in shedding light on Steiner's literary criticism as a philosophical inquiry into the human being-in-the-word. After stressing the importance of the Marxist philosophy of history for Steiner (insofar as it allows Steiner to highlight the role of literature and its relationship with the *Historizität* of the human being), Maj approaches the question of the novel which entails the interaction between history and literature. The author refers to what Steiner so elegantly describes, in *Language and Silence*, as the Pythagorean Genre, exemplified by singular experimental works such as Valéry's *Monsieur Teste*, Canetti's *Auto-da-fé*, Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil*, or Bloch's *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*. These are the seeds of the poetics of tomorrow, interstitial creations that challenge any previously perceptible literary categories. Following Steiner's footsteps with daunting precision, Baj's analysis is exemplary in its learning and dazzling theoretical intensity, but particularly arresting is the way in which he draws the reader's attention to the theological-metaphysical scope of Steiner's work and to the affinities between Steiner's and Hölderlin's idea of tragedy.

The second section, "A Kind of Survivor", is introduced by John C. McDowell's essay "Silenus's Wisdom and the 'Crime of Being': the Problem of Hope in George Steiner's Tragic Vision". McDowell deals with the Janus-faced question concerning Steiner's position on hope and tragedy by not shying away from reflecting upon the multifaceted ways in which Steiner's post-Auschwitz Jewishness and the ensuing tragic vision of man that it spells, which informs his pessimistic worldview, is mitigated by the more optimistic stance which can be perceived in the hermeneutical writings on the real presence.

In "George Steiner's Holocaust: Politics and Theology?", Robert Boyers provides a profound and balanced reading of Steiner's political novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1981). In this novel, he claims, Steiner has managed to reveal the effect of the holocaust on our understanding of the relation between good and evil. Boyers rejects the accusations of critics such as Hyam Maccoby who advocate that there is no

clear distinction in *The Portage* between Steiner's own views and those assumed by his fictional Hitler (see, also, in this volume Sagiv's criticism, as well as Steiner's response). If another critic, Alan Rosenfeld, is disturbed to find that Steiner's Hitler sounds more like George Steiner than like the historical figure, Maccoby is no less suspicious about Hitler's long speech of self-justification which concludes the work. Boyers, on the contrary, finds that both Rosenfeld and Maccoby fail to read *The Portage* as a novel, too hastily dismissing its ambiguous tensions and counterweights.

In "Language, Humanity, and the Holocaust: The Steinerian Triad", Catherine Chatterley asserts that to understand Steiner's research on the *Shoah* and its representation, one must first comprehend his theory of language. Demonstrating a profound knowledge of Steiner's oeuvre, Chatterley is successful in tracing the lasting impact of the Holocaust on Steiner's thinking which, in her telling, is indelibly determined by his complex view of language. Throughout the essay, the reader is being offered a compelling and comprehensive account of Steiner's post-Holocaust thought.

In his fascinating essay "Thinking Culture after Auschwitz", Ramin Jahanbegloo turns to Adorno's famous *ars poetica interdicta*: "No poetry after Auschwitz" (*Nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben ist barbarisch*). Tackling Steiner's post-Auschwitz sensibility, Jahanbegloo is right in recognizing that the notes toward a redefinition of culture crumbled before the unfathomable in Bluebeard's Castle; nevertheless, he equally accurately sees in Steiner's use of Paul Celan's poetry a renewed aesthetic-expressive possibility of representing the *Shoah* experience.

The fourth section, "The *Mysterium Tremendum*", is introduced by Gabrielle Scaramuzza's essay. In "La presenza di Verdi negli scritti di George Steiner", Scaramuzza traces the presence of Giuseppe Verdi in Steiner's writings. Firstly, the author starts off by claiming that, apart from the literary realm, music is undoubtedly the most congenial art to Steiner. Scaramuzza is certainly appreciative of the attention Steiner devotes to Verdi, insofar as he does not seem to share the muted ostracism imposed to the Italian composer. Drawing upon an impressive range of books (from *The Death of Tragedy* to *Errata*, from *No Passion Spent* to a review on D. Kimbell's *Verdi in the Age of Italian Romanticism*), a noteworthy awareness is raised towards Steiner's discussion of the tragic. The author finds particularly striking the comparison between Verdi and Shakespeare. An unequivocal illustration of Steiner's sympathetic view towards Verdi would be, for example, the assertion found in *Antigones*, according to which it can be argued that, due to its dramatic pregnancy and emotional maturity, *Otello* is superior to its source. However, echoing Steiner,

Scaramuzza is keen to stress that, despite the obvious dissimilarities, the plurivocity and the dialogical view of life which can be found in Shakespeare, with its variety of situations and characters, as well as its multiple points of view, are also discernible in Verdi's multiplicity of styles. In this sense, it could be argued that the main trend of the Shakespearean drama is no less than tragicomic, a facet which is also to be found in Verdi's compositions.

In "Music, Mathematics, and Poetry: George Steiner's 'Tritones' and the 'Three Majestic Tongues'", Ronald Sharp focuses his analysis on "Tritones", a 2009 piece written by Steiner for *Salmagundi*. In Sharp's view, this text provides an illuminating synthesis of the wide range of topics pursued by Steiner throughout his scholarly and existential itinerary. It is the author's intent to clarify not only the nature of the synthesis "Tritones" puts forward, but also the original perspectives disclosed by this dramatic conversation among a musician, a mathematician, and a poet - each one speaking what Steiner considers to be the three majestic tongues.

In "Last Tango with Steiner", Jeffrey Mehlman situates a reading of Borges on the history of tango in a Steinerian frame; the author's reflection, inspired by the hourglass thematized in Steiner's reading of Chardin's *Le Philosophe lisant* in *No Passion Spent*, is to be found in the space opened up by Steiner between Borges and Mérimée. Mehlman concludes his analysis by drawing upon the notion of melancholy, that sad thoughtful state of mind that Steiner perceived as being inseparable from thought itself: "Yet in the space we have observed him [Steiner] open up, between Borges and Mérimée, tango and habanera, it is the form of an hourglass that has been our guide, beyond time and its dilapidation, in courting the exhilaration of imagination itself."

The last section picks up Beckett's famous *dictum*: 'Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better', and it comprises two chapters. "Alluring Errata", three interviews given by Steiner to Nuccio Ordine, namely: interview a) "Steiner. Envy, Eroticism, God. Consciousness - explorations and taboos" (in: *Corriere della sera*, 29 February 2008); interview b) "Steiner: the Italian master who corrected the world" on the relationship between Sebastian Timpanaro and George Steiner (in: *Corriere della sera*, 27 January 2006); and interview c) "George Steiner: *The New Yorker*" (in: *Corriere della sera*, 17 July 2010). The volume closes with Steiner's piece "Ten (Possible) Reasons for the Sadness of Thought", an essay which first appeared in *Salmagundi*, n° 146-147 (Spring/Summer 2005), and which was then published in the bilingual volume: *Dix raisons (possibles) à la tristesse de pensée* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005). The essay opens with a translation from Schelling's *Über*

das Wesen der Menschlichen Freiheit (1809): “There is sadness which adheres to all mortal life, a sadness, however, which never attains reality, but only serves the everlasting joy of overcoming.” It is this melancholic vein that pervades this piece and resonates with Steiner’s musings in other works such as *Grammars of Creation*. To the overriding question ‘Why doesn’t human thought automatically lead to joy?’, Steiner responds: “It may be that Sophocles said it all in the choral ode on man in *Antigone*. Mastery of thought, of the uncanny speed of thought exalts man above all other living beings. Yet it leaves him a stranger to himself and to be world’s enormity. Sadness, *eine dem Leben anklebende Traurigkeit*, tenfold.”¹ The shortcomings of thought are, in Steiner’s view, not something accidental, but rather they make part of the ontological fabric of our *In-der-Welt-sein* (‘being-in-the-world’).

The present book is what we consider to be a timely volume of important essays on one of the most provocative thinkers, critics, and philosophers now writing. During an era in which the question of the ethical and of the status of the work of art, and its relation to a theological dimension, has returned with renewed urgency, Steiner’s work provides rich resources for reflection and we do hope the volume will stand on its own as a rich, nuanced accompaniment to an informed reading of Steiner’s work. With their broad range of thematic *foci*, theoretical approaches, and stunning constellations of quoted material from different backgrounds, all the essays in the book try to reflect upon the relation between human identity and language, ethics and literature, philosophy and art, and they all offer what we regard as being the most comprehensive collective engagement with Steiner’s work to date.

No doubt that reading Steiner is a risky venture. As I have argued elsewhere,² Steiner’s writings, like the powerful paintings of holocaust survivor Samuel Bak, do not harbor any definitive answers, rather harvest troubling questions which constitute a privileged stage where the thriving of multiple meanings in motion takes place. There is something hard to define in Steiner’s thought, something which could be tentatively described as a singular instance of a *poetic movement*. In *Human, All Too Human*, Nietzsche had already spoken of “Books that teach us to dance. There are writers who, by portraying the impossible as possible [...], elicit a feeling of high-spirited freedom, as if man were rising up on tiptoe and simply had

¹ George Steiner (2005), *Dix Raisons (Possibles) à la Tristesse de Pensée*, Paris, Albin Michel, p. 180.

² “A Vocação das Perguntas”, in: *Revista Ítaca*, nº 2, Lisbon, Editora Modo de Ler, pp. 140-160.

to dance out of inner pleasure.”³ The present volume hopes to show that, by choosing to open the wounds of possibility, George Steiner is such a writer.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche (1994), *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber and Stephen Lehmann, Harmondsworth, Penguin, pp. 124-125.

I.

THE WOUNDS OF BEING: POETICS, HERMENEUTICS, AND CULTURE

2.

TRANSLATION

RUTH PADEL

TRANSLATION

(for George Steiner)

Light around the body. Moving on
to wetland beyond full moon, next
water-and-feed, ease of hot muscle
and breath in a shrinking breast.

The V. My wing pushes down
making upwash off the tip - which he,
my neighbour, taps, and gets his lift for free.
Energy, flock, energy is everything.

Windflow. Moonshadow. Ground below -
and running dark protects. Over Sahara,
not to over-heat, take rock-cover
through the day. In air, keep in touch

calling. Insects, heartbeat, rest. Take off again.
Like that torn carob leaf, floating from shallow
beyond the headland into open sea, between
its own reflection and white-spun meridian.

3.

“THE LONG DAY’S JOURNEY OF THE SATURDAY”: GEORGE STEINER’S REAL PRESENCES AND THE “MIDDLE SPACE”

CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT

“[T]he devotion now given to art is probably more fervent than ever before in the history of culture. This devotion takes the form of an extreme demand: now that art is no longer required to please, it is expected to provide the spiritual substance of life.”

—Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity*

It is readily observable that George Steiner, in *Real Presences* and elsewhere, has a proclivity for the absolute construction - e.g., “All serious art, music and literature is a *critical* act” (RP 11); “Only language knows no conceptual, no projective finality” (RP 53); and “Like no other event in our mental history, the postulate of God’s *kenosis* through Jesus and of the never-ending availability of the Saviour in the wafer and wine of the Eucharist conditions not only the development of western art and rhetoric itself, but also, at a much deeper level, that of our understanding and reception of the truth of art” (GC 55). Things are experienced in terms of their presence or absence (e.g., “Mallarmé alters the epistemology of ‘real presence’ [theologically grounded] into one of ‘real absence’” [RP 99]), of their affirmation or negation. It is, then, something of an irony that while Steiner begins *Real Presences* with the apodictic claim that our most important understandings are, “in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence” (RP 3), the book should so repeatedly situate itself in that divided dimension which Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age* (2007), calls “the middle space.” That is, when addressing himself to

the aesthetic substitutions that modernity employs in place of traditional religious belief, Taylor notes:

I am thinking of the way in which publicly performed music, in concert hall and opera house, becomes an especially important and serious activity in nineteenth century bourgeois Europe and America. People begin to listen to concerts with an almost religious intensity.... The performance has taken on something of a rite, and has kept it to this day. There is a sense that something great is being said in this music. This too has helped create a kind of middle space, neither explicitly believing, but not atheistic either, a kind of undefined spirituality. (360)

Taylor, a philosopher whose religious beliefs have, of late, become more manifest in his writings, chooses nevertheless not to disparage this “middle space”—this “undefined spirituality”—but, like Theodore Ziolkowski, in *Modes of Faith: Secular Surrogates for Lost Religious Belief* (2007), to see it as an honest attempt by many of his contemporaries and their predecessors to wrestle free, in Steiner’s words, of an “agnostic secularism more or less unendurable” (RP 221). Accordingly, what I propose to investigate, while borrowing from both Taylor and Ziolkowski, are the tensions manifest in Steiner’s attachment to this middle space, for the space, especially for a person of Steiner’s temperament, comes fraught with all sorts of compromises and paradoxes. But Steiner is a modern whose struggles with belief —“Modernity is in essence agnostic,” he says (Interview)—have evinced discernible parallels with those moderns who, in Taylor’s view, “tried to make their medium a locus of epiphany” (360) as well as those European moderns¹ who, in Ziolkowski’s view, sought solace in surrogate belief systems. In the latter case, World War I is, as it is for Steiner,² conceived as the crucial fulcrum around which a large scale “crisis of faith” began to take its modern shape; and in *Modes of Faith*,

¹ While Taylor’s focus is framed by instances in “Europe and America” (360), Ziolkowski’s study is focused more exclusively upon Europe, though he thinks the same “crisis of faith” has, albeit later, made its way to America’s shores, taking note of “the fact that, according to many reports and surveys, society in the United States at the turn of the millennium is experiencing a crisis of faith remarkably similar to the one that tormented European minds a century ago—and often responding to it in astonishingly similar ways” (xi).

² Cf. *Bluebeard’s Castle*: “There are still a good many alive today for whom that famous cloudless summer of 1914 extends backward, a long way, into a world more civil, more confident, more humanly articulate than any we have known since. It is against the remembrance of that great summer, and our own symbolic knowledge of it, that we test the present cold” (6).

Ziolkowski sets out to investigate this same crisis "that shook Europe in the decades before and after World War I and the responses that crisis elicited as individuals sought surrogates to fill the spiritual emptiness in their minds and souls" (x). These modern surrogates for an eclipsed religious faith were, and continue to be, many, but in *Modes of Faith* Ziolkowski chooses to focus upon five—"art for art's sake, the flight to India, socialism, myth, and utopian vision" (xi)—for the reason that these especially "attracted to their ranks many of the most thoughtful minds of the twentieth century" (xi). And as he dwells amidst "these theologies of the profane" and their priests (49), he finds more and more evidence of both an obsessiveness with theology even when it is rebuked and a readiness to employ theology's discourse to experiences and fields that are not necessarily to be conceived of as theological (Richard Hooker: "Theologie, what is it, but the Science of things Divine?"). Instances of the first include Frederick Nietzsche ("Every church is the stone on the grave of a god-man: it wants at any cost to prevent him from being resurrected. God suffocated from theology" [20-21].) and Edmund Gosse ("to face the fact that the old faith is now impossible to sincere and intelligent minds, and that we must courageously face the difficulty of following entirely different ideals in moving towards the higher life" [25].); and of the second include Walter Benjamin's "my thought is related to theology as is the blotting pad to ink. It is wholly soaked with it" (167) and Gershom Scholem's own reflections upon his friend Benjamin's dilemma: "His insights are those of a theologian marooned in the realm of the profane" (27). What is frequently witnessed is a situation wherein religion provides the rhetorical figures for a discourse which, again, is not necessarily religious in itself, just as for James Joyce "Christianity had," in the words of his biographer Richard Ellmann, "subtly evolved in his mind from a religion into a system of metaphors" (78).

It is my argument here that Steiner also inclines in this direction, not only viewing religion (Christianity, Judaism, Islamism, etc.) as first and foremost "a system of metaphors" (Steiner: "Strictly considered, all theology, however profound or eloquent, is verbiage" [MUB 204]) but also borrowing from the discourses of religion and/or theology to extend gravitas to his own theology of the profane, that is, the aesthetic. "[I]n a specifically religious, for us Judeo-Christian sense," writes Steiner in *Real Presences*, "the aesthetic is the making formal of epiphany" (226). And as noted, Steiner begins this arguably most important of his books with the provocative claim that the aesthetic, like philosophy and serious intellection more generally, must be understood as grounded in the "necessary possibility" of God's existence (3):

This study will contend that the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter the *other* in its condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence.

This wager—it is that of Descartes, of Kant and of every poet, artist, composer of whom we have explicit record—predicates the presence of a realness, of a “substantiation” (the theological reach of this word is obvious) within language and form. It supposes a passage, beyond the fictive or the purely pragmatic, from meaning to meaningfulness. The conjecture is that “God” *is*, not because our grammar is outworn; but that grammar lives and generates worlds because there is the wager on God. (4)

However, before Steiner offers his thesis, he offers a short excursus as to why the thesis might be thought of as provocative, of why many equally serious men and women might view his claim as just so much posturing. That is, this is a book that actually begins with a counter thesis, a thesis that always shadows the more obdurate thesis and that over time - in the writings subsequent to *Real Presences*, especially in *My Unwritten Books*’ closing chapter “Begging the Question” - might even be thought of as doing serious damage to, even displacing, his more pronounced thesis. It is here, in this alternative thesis, that Steiner acknowledges just how dependent humankind, over centuries, has become upon “[v]acant metaphors” (3). He begins, in fact, with an analogy, taking note of the fact that we still employ the terms “sunrise” and “sunset” even though the Ptolemaic model of the solar system has long been supplanted by the Copernican, an analogy that then leads him to the further fact that “rational men and women, particularly in the scientific and technological realities of the West, still refer to ‘God,’” even as “[n]o plausible reflection or belief underwrites His presence” (3). In *Real Presences*, Steiner’s opening gambit is there to highlight his more pronounced claim that “God’s presence” underwrites the very reflection and/or belief that finds God wanting. As he says, his own book “argues the reverse” of what is generally accepted as the case, when it comes to theorizing about the Deity, among Western scientists and intellectuals more generally (3). Like “Descartes and Newton [who] make appeal to a divine inception and guarantee,” so too, says Steiner, does he: “Such appeal is, in regard to meaning in the language and the arts, precisely the one I am seeking to elucidate” (72).

Yet, as I say, Steiner’s faith in “divine inception and guarantee” appears to have an expiration date attached to it, for there will come a point when Steiner himself finds it very difficult to extend credence to his own appeals. As he concedes in “Begging the Question,” his own faith in a divine first being has found it difficult to withstand the onslaught of all those things -