

**Disenchantment: George Steiner and the Meaning of Western Civilization after Auschwitz.**

Catherine D. Chatterley

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With the publication of *Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* in 1967, George Steiner emerged as one of the earliest and most eloquent of critics to reflect seriously on the connections within Western culture between the ideals of humane literacy and the unspeakable deeds of political bestiality carried out under Nazi rule. Prior to this time, several important works of historical scholarship on the persecution and mass murder of the Jews had appeared, as had a number of revealing memoirs and works of fiction. But until Steiner, few essayists writing in English in the post-Holocaust period had inquired deeply into how it came to be that classical humanism and extreme barbarism commingled so intimately in the very heart of European civilization. This unsettling collusion and the many troubling questions it raises go to the core of much of Steiner's thinking over the past half-century.

Catherine Chatterley's lucidly written, admirably comprehensive book investigates these concerns over the course of Steiner's career and demonstrates how they grow directly out of the author's acute consciousness of being a European Jew born just a decade before the outbreak of World War II. Although he wrote a highly personal essay on Jewish victimization under the Hitler regime ("A Kind of Survivor"), Steiner did not himself experience the atrocities visited upon millions of Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. As Chatterley points out in her clarifying account of Steiner's early years, his father, Frederick Steiner, a cultivated, perspicacious Viennese Jew, correctly read the threatening signs emerging in Europe with the rise of Hitler and moved his family out of harm's way, first to Paris, where George was born, and then, when the latter was eleven years old, to safety in New York City. Chatterley argues convincingly that the elder Steiner was the seminal influence on his son's development and instilled in him "both a profound love for European culture and an awareness of its contempt for Jews" (13).

The tensions inherent in this radical duality inform Steiner's writings from his first book to his last. In her review of this large corpus—it now comprises over twenty-five books and large numbers of articles, interviews, and book reviews—Chatterley shows some notable changes in the author's views over time, but these involve Steiner's interpretations of the events he studies and not any significant alteration in the subjects that draw him most passionately. Among other preoccupations, the Holocaust and its impact upon language, literature, and culture, the meaning and role of the humanities, and the complex connections between Jews and Christians within Western civilization remain constants in Steiner's oeuvre.

Beginning in his earliest writings and continuing to this day, Steiner's thinking places a strong emphasis on the moral, metaphysical, and religious dimensions of the issues that mean most to him. While not himself religiously observant, he recognizes that questions about God and transcendent meaning are foundational within Western culture, and concerted attempts to deny or displace them can bring on violent distortions of social and political life. Worthy of note in this regard is his early observation (in *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*, 1959) that the two major totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, Soviet Communism and Nazism, pursue eschatological goals that arise, in part, from "a denial of God": "The Kingdom of God must be realized as the Kingdom of Man. This is the theology of the totalitarian utopias" (38). Steiner does not continue to pursue Nazism as a utopian movement, but he remains absorbed by the notion that it represents a "vicious chapter in the ongoing effort of Western culture to divorce itself from religion" (69).

This viciousness found its most lethal expression in the Nazi aim to annihilate the Jews of Europe during World War II. Steiner strongly believes that this attempted genocide, which had a long foreground in millennia-old Christian anti-Semitism, needs to be regarded as a historically and morally transforming event within Western culture and demands explanations that go beyond those offered by most historians and political theorists of Nazi Germany. His own thinking about the origins of the Holocaust are memorably elaborated through the notion of a Jewish "*blackmail of transcendence*," which first appears in the slim but provocative volume, *In Bluebeard's Castle* (1971). As Chatterley describes it:

According to Steiner, the Jewish people are responsible for creating three separate systems of human perfectibility by which they are perceived to blackmail humanity: Mosaic monotheism, Christianity, and Marxism.... Jewish ethical demands, which flow from these three systems, are beyond the grasp of humanity, and the psychic stress produced by this failure eventually leads to resentment and hatred for the people responsible for it. This antagonistic process, forced upon the world by the Jews, is the *blackmail of transcendence*.... [It] results in deep loathing for the Jewish people as

the inventors of God and His Law.... This enduring animosity motivates the Nazi desire to exterminate the Jewish people, and it also accounts for the indifference to Jewish suffering felt by so many others. (67-69)

Steiner continues this line of thinking in his later writings, most notably in his novel about Hitler, *The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.* (1981), and, according to Chatterley, subsequently "integrates this theory with the Christian theology of the Jewish refusal and murder of Jesus.... Steiner argues that Auschwitz is a Christian act of Jewish vengeance against the Jews who, in the Christian imagination, both invented and killed God" (130).

As an explanation for the Holocaust, this notion is as bold as it is original. While Steiner's view may not find ready approval among scholars who prefer hard empirical evidence to speculative theory, Chatterley is correct in maintaining that Steiner's ideas warrant serious pondering. She provides that and much more in her pioneering study of the life and work of one of our most creative literary and cultural critics. Whether one agrees with them fully or not, George Steiner's contributions to post-Holocaust thought have been seminal, and anyone seeking a well-informed, judiciously-drawn exposition of his work can hardly do better than to consult this volume.

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