

*Moshe Idel*



## **GEORGE STEINER: A PROPHET OF ABSTRACTION**

ON THE BREAKDOWN OF TRADITIONAL MYTHS

George Steiner's contributions to the humanities are numerous and varied, consisting of offerings in a number of different fields including linguistics, philosophy, and literary criticism and a variety of writings in different literary genres. Though Steiner repeatedly presents himself as a critic of culture, he often functions more as a philosopher of culture. Certainly critical elements are central in his entire oeuvre, the most blatant being his criticism of European Christian culture for containing elements that served as the religious background for the Holocaust and his analysis of the crisis of modern culture or what he describes as "postculture." He is also known for his harsh criticism of Zionism and the State of Israel as a movement and nation-state carrying all the dangers inherent in such entities. Less pronounced is his critique of Jewish orthodoxy. Last but not least is his occasional sharp criticism of communism. However, Steiner has no confidence in any given national state, even in the democratic West, as is implicit in his explicit recommendation to keep more than one passport.

However, the critical aspects of Steiner's works, notwithstanding their originality, are of less importance to us here, though I shall have something to say about them later in this article. I would first like to consider a philosophical aspect of his approach to culture and try, by thinking in Steiner's terms, to apply it to issues to which he has not applied it. Finally, again by resorting to his own concepts, I shall ask some questions about the implications of his cultural vision of the role of the Jews in Europe, as part of his understanding of his own role. I would say that the most interesting test of one's cultural categories is how one's own thinking responds to an interrogation conducted according to one's own arguments.<sup>1</sup>

In a seminal passage written early in his career in *The Death of Tragedy*, Steiner describes the plight of the modern artist who no longer has the advantage of the classical education that enriched both the creation and the reception of the premoderns. This is the reason for the crisis of tragedy in modern times:

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But where the artist must be the architect of his own mythology, time is against him. He cannot live long enough to impose his special vision and the symbols he has devised for it on the habits of language and the feelings of his society. The Christian mythology in Dante had behind it centuries of elaboration and precedent to which the reader could naturally refer when placing the particular approach of the poet. The cabalistic system invoked by Blake and the moon-magic of Yeats have only private or occult tradition. . . . The idiosyncratic world image, without an orthodox or public frame to support it, is kept in focus only by virtue of the poet's present talent. It does not take root in the common soil. . . . A mythology crystallizes sediment accumulated over great stretches of time, and gathers into conventional form the primal memories and the historical experiences of the race. Being the speech of the mind when it is in a state of wonder or perception, the great myths are elaborated as slowly as language itself.<sup>2</sup>

Steiner surmises cultural rhythms that are not easily put into context in a specific geographical area or in a limited period of time but, rather, follow much more the logic of *long duree*. The archaeological mind-set of this approach is crucial, and it presupposes an understanding of the manner in which historical accumulation takes place and is articulated or crystallized. However, in addition to this vertical attitude toward culture as accumulation, the horizontal vector is also conspicuous: without the breadth of the critical mass, the public, the common soil, vertical accumulation can hardly become meaningful on a large scale. The depth and complexity of a work of art depend on the vertical vector, the richness of its various strata and the forms of their crystallization; its wide reception depends, however, more on the horizontal one. Or, to formulate the basic strategy as understood by Steiner in the above passage in different words, the modern artist is an architect who needs a solid and large ground in order to build a large edifice. The decomposition of the tectonic cultural strata endangers the edifice, which may easily become a floating balloon.

However, when the codes upon which a modern writer is relying are not public and accepted in a certain society but, instead, are secret or private, as was the case with Blake and Yeats, the works based on them become enigmatic and idiosyncratic. This type of work is approachable only by the very few who have some access to the ideas or have some kind of unusual and individual connection to the spiritual structure of the authors. In other words, in order to produce a classic work of art in a traditional society the creative artist should plunge into the linguistic, symbolic, and mythical fabric of the culture and should be able to restructure it in his or her work in such a way that it is both novel enough to contribute something significantly new and, at the same time, traditional enough so as to allow the specific audience to recognize the old elements that peer between the words. Thus, to create for a community is to distance oneself from the old

molds without breaking them or transforming them in an unrecognizable manner. This intense dialogue between the specific public and its historical riches is, consequently, the clue to the success of the traditional creator and of the work of art.

Though it is written as an explanation of the way in which modern artistic creativity differs from the premodern one, I find this passage fascinatingly appropriate in also understanding the way in which some phenomena other than tragedy may be understood, and I shall try to apply the argument in this passage to other topics that Steiner did not address, as well as to Steiner's own theories. First and foremost, by accepting the argument discussed above, we can better understand the way in which some forms of Jewish mysticism emerged in the Middle Ages and even in premodern times. To follow Steiner's lead, the interaction between individual creativity and a rich traditional layered framework can help us understand not only the emergence of some systems of thought but also how they were received and disseminated. For example, by adopting such a philosophy of culture, the emergence of Kabbalah in late-twelfth-century Europe is much better understood as a process in which some traditional masters built upon earlier Jewish symbols, myths, and oral traditions circulating in rabbinic circles than as the sudden explosion of gnostic mythology, understood as historically and phenomenologically antagonistic to rabbinic Judaism.<sup>3</sup> I believe that a fruitful argument may be built upon such a basis, and I hope to do so elsewhere. Here I am concerned not with the medieval cultural processes but with more recent ones.

I would now like to address in some detail two different and much more modern phenomena that may validate Steiner's cultural philosophy, though they emerged centuries after the period to which he is referring, that is, the late medieval era up to Milton's writings.<sup>4</sup> I believe that one sees a reflection of this type of commonly articulated symbolism and mythology in the manner in which Steiner describes the Holocaust. Some sort of nexus between his book on the death of tragedy, from which I quoted above, and the Holocaust was made by Steiner himself at the end of that study. However, this connection is offered on the basis of his understanding of tragedy rather than predicated on his cultural philosophy, as tried below.<sup>5</sup>

According to Steiner, the Holocaust is not an accident in European culture. Rather, it is better understood as the result of something much deeper than merely the political and economical circumstances of Europe in the 1930s. It is, according to Steiner, mainly the result of a religious worldview, though other sorts of processes might also have contributed to it.<sup>6</sup> In his address to the Edinburgh festival of 2001, he poignantly noted as a critic of culture:

The history and inward identities of Europe are wholly enmeshed with those of western Christianity, be it Roman Catholic or reformed. Although the continuities have been, at times, subterranean and tragically contingent, they do lead from the murderous pogroms of medieval Europe or of Lincoln to the Holocaust. These are continuities of doctrine and anathema, notably Pauline. They were taken up again, obscenely, by Luther. More than arguably, European civilization will not regain its truth or natural vitality until the causal implications of Christianity, of its founding doctrines and institutions thereafter, in the twentieth-century catastrophe, are faced up to unequivocally. Vast lies and strategic amnesia have hollowed out the heart of Europe after 1945. Of that emptiness may come the monstrous, as we have witnessed it in the former Yugoslavia.<sup>7</sup>

Except for the significant role played by the powerful Eastern Orthodox Church in Yugoslavia, I basically agree with this diagnosis. In his major essay on the underlying cause of the Shoah, Steiner describes its enactment as “Hell made immanent,” claiming that Dante’s picture of the hell that haunted Western civilization has been realized in history.<sup>8</sup> If he is right, as I suspect, it means that as a European venture the Holocaust once again builds upon a number of deeply seated symbols and myths, quite widespread and rooted in large masses of the population, regarding perceptions of the Jews. Or, to put it in other words, stemming from Steiner’s cultural philosophy, the common soil of Christian European mythology did not quite disintegrate in the seventeenth century but, in fact, continued to operate, at least insofar as the myths regarding Jews were concerned. European culture, at least on this issue, contains more staying power than previously suspected even by the young Steiner himself. Including the Holocaust in his general cultural philosophy as delineated in *The Death of Tragedy* gives his general approach much more cohesion.

By comparing the passage from *The Death of Tragedy* to the speech at the Edinburgh festival, it is clear that the reference to *long duree* mythology regarding Jews in the latter assumes that the dramatic change seen in Milton is not evoked. Europe changed much less than the young Steiner thought it did. However, the question may still be asked: Is it possible that changes will nevertheless occur in Europe according to Steiner’s cultural vision? No serious attempt to deal with antisemitic ingredients is apparent on any practical, as opposed to theoretical, level. Is it really possible to eradicate the unpleasant connotations of symbols and myths, which are so tightly connected to European languages, after they have become integrated and accumulated over great stretches of time? After all, as Steiner so adequately put it, “Language is its own past.”<sup>9</sup> This is the reason why, again as he recognized, though in another context, Wagner is one of the moderns who was able to come close to rivaling the premodern classics: “He nearly instilled his concocted mythology into the general mind. The

Wagnerian note sounded throughout social and political life and had its mad echoes in the ruin of modern Europe.”<sup>10</sup> However, Steiner immediately adds, in 1969, an optimistic note: “But it is now rapidly fading.” (In my opinion Steiner’s judgment here is incorrect. Not only is the significance of Wagner not fading rapidly enough, it may well not be fading at all.<sup>11</sup> I also note that in reading Steiner’s quite recent *Entretiens*, his general description of what is happening in contemporary Europe does not seem to be at all encouraging.<sup>12</sup>)

Let us now turn to another, totally different example based on Steiner’s ideas of creativity in traditional societies but never discussed by Steiner in his theories of culture. While Steiner uses many European examples in his discussions of a philosophy of culture, he never refers to important developments in modern Judaism, with the exception of his insistent critique of Zionism to which we shall return later on. Following his views noted above, we may account for the success of three modern phenomena in Jewish culture. Eighteenth-century Polish Hasidism and the impact of the more recent Rabbi Abraham Isaac ha-Kohen Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of modern Palestine (d. 1933), not only have been accepted by important segments of the Jewish communities but also have shaped Jewish tradition in novel ways. Common to both is an implicit, and more rarely an explicit, criticism of the traditional Jewish societies they addressed. Quintessential for understanding their success is the fact that they used Hebrew, and sometimes also Yiddish, to create ideas and to communicate with their audiences and could rely on the world of associations that resonated among their Jewish readers.

Last but not least in this context, and much closer to Steiner’s field but to my best knowledge never mentioned by him, is the astonishing literary accomplishment of the Israeli writer and Noble Prize recipient in the field of literature, S. Y. Agnon. Having an exceptional acquaintance with all the various strata of Hebrew since the Bible and the religious worldviews that were expressed in them, Agnon succeeded in offering a sometimes critical and ironical description of traditional Jewish society in Eastern Europe and Israel. His writings represent one of the most astonishing examples of translation, one from many layers of earlier Hebrew into a modern Hebrew, by a writer who was born in Galicia and lived in Germany but decided to settle in Jerusalem for most of his life. This inner form of translation may constitute a new, additional chapter in Steiner’s *After Babel*, and it still waits the consideration of a scholar who has digested Steiner’s innovative book. (Also, the manner in which the young Gershom Scholem translated some of the young Agnon’s Hebrew stories into German should be analyzed according to Steiner’s methodology.)

In any case, these three examples show that at least in some sections of Eastern European Jewry—as well as in northern African Jewry and

in other segments of Jewry and their reverberations in modern Israel—where the Hebrew language was retained as a main repository of Jewish tradition, including Kabbalah, the emergence and reception of widespread mystical and other bodies of literature were significantly facilitated. These two Jewish languages, Hebrew and Yiddish, served as a common soil upon which it was possible to build a revival. I wonder whether the most fertile experiment of Steiner’s cultural assumptions in both *The Death of Tragedy* and *After Babel* is not European literature but, in fact, the dynamics of Israeli Hebrew culture.

Steiner’s description of the privatization of cultural codes is true not only regarding the English poets he referred to in the passage already quoted above but also in the case of many Jews in Central and Western Europe since the nineteenth century who lost contact with most of the strata of Jewish tradition once they adopted the rationalism of enlightenment. Moreover, to return to the last phrase in Steiner’s passage, symbols and myths are closely related to language and its development. There is no doubt that the split inflicted on the Jewish tradition by the attempt to integrate it into the enlightened culture is more visible in the case of Hebrew. After the first stages of the Jewish Enlightenment (the Haskalah), as represented by Moses Mendelssohn and Salomon Maimon, German replaced Hebrew as the main language of high-culture Jewish communication in Central Europe. This is the reason why none of the masterpieces created by Jews in those parts of Europe where German or French were dominant achieved any significant impact in Israeli culture similar to the immense resonance of Agnon’s writings. Even Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel, and Levinas, all of whom were Hebraically literate and intimately acquainted with traditional Judaism, had but a limited impact on the Israeli cultural scene because they wrote in German and French. When compared to Gershom Scholem’s immense influence in Israel, their thought made an impression only very slowly. Coupled with the negative feelings toward German that were prevalent in Israel because of the Nazi atrocities, the interwar “Jewish radiance,” to use Steiner’s characterization, was much less apparent to Jews in Israel than it was to those in America or Europe. As Steiner remarked so pertinently, Kafka’s language was a borrowed one and quite skeletal, and, according to him, only in Hebrew can Jewish literature take roots.<sup>13</sup>

However, that radiance lost much more: most of the public, the common soil, the living audience of Central European Jews of Central Europe, were either expatriated or exterminated. Today, the appropriation of main interwar Jewish figures in Europe, for example, Walter Benjamin, Gershom Scholem, and Hans Jonas, is more a matter of the search by European intellectuals for an “autochthon” alternative to the nature of German culture and language in the Nazi period. Those

among the assimilated Jewish European intellectuals who believed there could be some form of coexistence based upon the unilateral contribution of Jews to European culture, without expecting any reciprocity from the other side, lost more than their contemporaries who were skeptics. What may be even worse, to resort to Steiner's view, is that by their awareness of the coming danger they might, in a way, have contributed to its realization.<sup>14</sup> Neither was the fate of the Jewish intellectuals and writers who escaped the Holocaust and believed in the other Jewish heresy, Marxism, any better. The Stalinist oppression did not stop at Jewish political competitors but, indeed, spread to the entire Jewish cultural elite.

Last but not least in this connection we may ask: What is the relationship between the traditional symbols and myths mentioned in the first quote and the concept of civilization, which is enmeshed in dogmas and anathema, as understood by Steiner? Are the two identical? Are they connected to his notion of culture? It is hard to decide on the basis of those quotes, though I am inclined to see such a connection. In any case, in both instances Steiner speaks about mass phenomena.

DESOLATION: INSUFFICIENCY OF LANGUAGE AND SILENCE,  
OR PLENITUDE

Much of Steiner's cultural message deals with the crisis of Western culture. This is a vast topic, and his numerous treatments suffice to make his position perfectly clear. Here I am concerned solely with a specific instance of the more general crisis. Steiner confessed that many of the figures of Western culture who fascinated him displayed some form of desolation. In his essay "A Kind of Survivor" he judges that H. Arendt, E. Bloch, C. Lévi-Strauss, E. Kahler, and Adorno share "a common note as of desolation."<sup>15</sup> A similar note is found also in his description of "the desolate mockeries of [K.] Kraus."<sup>16</sup> Also, Kafka's desolation, which leaves no room for hope for "us," abundant as it is in principle, recurs several times in Steiner's writings. Not being well acquainted with the writing of many of those eminent thinkers, and given the conciseness of Steiner's sentence, I am left with the impression that Steiner is passionately attracted to what he perceives to be the experience of desolation. This is hardly a surprising attitude in post-Shoah Jewish sensitivity, even if someone did not personally experience the atrocities committed by the Nazis and their collaborators. This propensity toward desolation causes a certain singling out of the authors writing before World War II who somehow anticipated the horrors destined to occur. For Steiner, some of his favorite authors did, like his father, have a premonition of the terrible future, and they symbolize it

in their writings. This is evident in the way Steiner understands the attitudes of Kafka and Kraus. We may speak about a time/zone of the Shoah in some parts of the mid-European Jewish culture, which includes authors writing between the late twenties and late nineties of the twentieth century. From this point of view Steiner not only is someone attracted by the desolated but also is, in my opinion, continuing their basic worldviews. He is not only a kind of survivor but also someone who absorbed their deepest cultural instincts and formulated them as a philosophy of culture.

Part of that propensity for the theme of desolation has to do with Steiner's perception of the insufficiency of language, what he calls the crisis of language. Desolation is a fertile soil for silence. And silence is a language that speaks only in the past tense. Steiner says that the twentieth century was witness to a corrosion of the value of words: "Words are corroded by the false hopes and lies they have voiced."<sup>17</sup> The question may be asked: Why is this corrosion taking place only in this century when it has not occurred during human history more generally? The answer seems to be the collapse of a more general worldview within which words were enmeshed into more comprehensive structures, sustained by religious and social institutions and personal faith. With the slow weakening of these structures words lost some of their semantic stability and the support of the more comprehensive systems.

As part of this overall process Steiner emphasized the role played by Jews in the introduction of critical speculation about language in the last two generations, including the emphasis on silence and the failure of the word.<sup>18</sup> None of those who stressed the theme of desolation has emphasized the importance of silence as Kafka did, and Steiner has been especially attuned to those moments in Kafka's work.<sup>19</sup> Kafka confessed to his friend Gustav Janouch: "Je voudrai courir vers les Juifs misérables du ghetto et embrasser l'ourlet de leur robe sans rien dire. S'ils voulaient m'accepter pres d'eux en silence, mon bonheur serait complete."<sup>20</sup> A double silence is envisaged here in the hypothetical encounter of the desolate Kafka and the destitute ghetto Jews. Kafka's *imaginaire* was indeed based on happiness materialized in some sort of silence. This is not just an impossibility of which one cannot speak but, as Steiner has remarked so many times, a powerful language in itself. This is also the case in Kafka's parable in the *Silence of the Sirens*, to which Steiner refers once.<sup>21</sup> I doubt if this cult of silence represents anything viable relative to the "miserable" Jews of the ghetto. They would, for sure, have a great deal to say while embracing Kafka, neither being silent nor addressing him in German. Following this concern with silence in his heroes, Steiner describes himself as a collector of silence.<sup>22</sup>

In the years in Prague during which Kafka's feeling of loneliness reached its peak, a new way of life was shaped in the land of Israel, the kibbutz, a word that means "to live together." Moreover, the "desolates" were active during the same period in which the rebirth of Hebrew as a spoken language took place, mainly in the land of Israel. It was a decision to continue history and speak in the future tense.<sup>23</sup> While the abysses opened by the European crisis of language became deeper and deeper, displaying a growing uncertainty as to the reliability of language as representation, culminating in Derrida's deconstructionist position, other Jews who opted for a communal Jewish experience invested much of their confidence in resurrecting their ancestral language, Hebrew, as a spoken language. This is an enterprise that has few, if any, parallels in the history of human culture or linguistics.

The cosmopolitan Jews who were, and still are, caught between the Scylla of a culture they deemed as universal and thus open to all Europeans, irrespective of their extraction, and the Charybdis of their lost particularistic Jewish culture started to charter this no-man's-land shortly before their sympathetic cultural environment was turned to ashes and then afterward. Expressing themselves in languages, which demanded their rare virtuosity in order to circumvent sediments not quite welcoming to their efforts, they explored those abysses and could not but feel the hollowness inherent in language as such but amplified by their idiosyncratic experiences. At the same time, Hebrew flowered in an unparalleled manner in other parts of the modern Jewish world. Today, Israeli culture and literature are translated into numerous languages, are taught worldwide in universities, and are still developing. All this has little to do with desolation. Numerous problems have arisen in the geographical place where the Jewish People chose to build their independent future, and many sacrifices and mistakes have been made in the course of time in the new State of Israel. But nothing on the scale of the utter desolation into which some mid-European Jews plunged just before their culture and common soil turned into ashes seems to haunt Israeli Jews, even in the moments of their greatest ordeals.

What is the status of silence in a religious culture that is so permeated by the need for the perfection of language as Judaism is? At best it is precarious, and the topic is very rarely discussed.<sup>24</sup> Silence is much more a Christian theme, as a comparison between Jewish and Christian mystical literature easily demonstrates.<sup>25</sup> For many reasons Hebrew, especially biblical Hebrew, has been considered not only a sacred language but, and what is much more pertinent to our discussion, as the language through which creation is made possible. Moreover, we may speak about the ontology of language, about a divine immanence in the world made possible by means of Hebrew.<sup>26</sup> Jewish mystics saw

the Hebrew language as the transcendental source of the world and as such had little to do with allowing silence a significant role. Jewish mystics, mostly in small elites, were confident that they possessed a powerful tool, in fact, the most powerful one available, put into practice by the daily liturgy in the Hebrew language. This idea also permeated more popular Jewish circles, as we learn from an extremely widespread Yiddish song, "Oifen Pripitzic": "fun die 'oysies shafen mir koyah," which means, "from letters we draw strength." Surprisingly enough, it was among the followers of those Jewish intellectuals who chose the language of the majority that feelings of despair, desolation, and retreat into silence were evoked. It may be, as Steiner surmised, that the desolates represented an antithetical move against Judaism, a culture that in most of its historical manifestations overemphasized the power of language and books.<sup>27</sup> Though Steiner would see those dissidents within the Jewish camp as heroes, Gershom Scholem regarded them as the cursed and exterminated tribe of the biblical Korah.<sup>28</sup> Fascinatingly enough, while describing so eloquently the death of the German language in the Nazi period and its more recent repercussions, Steiner never mentions, to my best knowledge, the concomitant rebirth of Hebrew.<sup>29</sup> Would this not be a fascinating juxtaposition—the dying German language of the exterminators and the parallel surge of the language of the exterminated? Why convey the impression that only one type of process is active concerning language?

A theme that is often repeated in Steiner's theory of the Jewish role in Western culture concerns the three major contributions made by Judaism, which could also be considered to be three burdens or black-mails, that created the resentment of the Europeans and culminated in the Holocaust. These three factors are (a) the abstraction represented by the transcendental God of the Israelite prophets, (b) the character of early (Jewish) Christianity, and (c) Marxism.<sup>30</sup> Steiner has the impression that since biblical times Jews have had a special predilection for abstraction.<sup>31</sup> He tends to conflate monotheism, transcendentalism, and abstraction in different instances in his writings.<sup>32</sup> The conflation between the first two descriptions of ancient Jewish theology was known even among some Jewish scholars, especially given the impact of Rudolph Otto's *Idea of the Holy*, though more recently it has lost much of the appeal it had.<sup>33</sup> Again under Otto's impact, the ineffability of the divine existence can be seen in the way in which such an important scholar as Scholem describes the image of God in Kabbalah. "In Kabbalah," he wrote, "one is speaking of a reality which cannot be revealed or expressed at all save through the symbolic allusion. A hidden authentic reality, which cannot be expressed in itself and according to its own laws, finds expression in its symbol."<sup>34</sup> This stand is just one example of a more general theory of Judaism, with Kabbalah as a special

example of deferral. It is not only the negative theology described in this passage that is so central to Scholem's understanding of kabbalistic theology and the function of language. The concept of deferral also applies, as Scholem once put it, to Jews in the exile, since only the coming of the Messiah will allow the attainment of the kinds of perfection that are blocked by the exilic condition.<sup>35</sup> Creativity is either related to or conditioned by historical crisis, and even the scholar's understanding of kabbalistic thought is facilitated by undergoing a crisis.<sup>36</sup> Quite a different image from Kafka's or, in broader terms, that of the desolates was shaped under the impact of German Romanticism, with its emphasis on the symbol on the one side and transcendence on the other. Though I do not deny the existence of transcendental abstract monotheism in Judaism, at least in the philosophical writings of classical diaspora figures such as Philo, Maimonides, or Herman Cohen, this position is by no means a widespread theology in Judaism and scarcely exists in the Bible. Indeed, the Bible is not a book of theology, and it expounds a variety of different and even conflicting understandings of God, none of them abstract. God has a face, though it is difficult to see it, and Moses is only shown the back (Ex. 33:20). Elsewhere, he is described as seeing the image of God—"Temunat YHWH Yabit"—and as speaking to God mouth to mouth (Deut. 12:8). Even the famous "‘Eheyeh asher ‘Eheyeh," which has attracted much attention from Steiner, has been understood by rabbinic and kabbalistic interpreters in a manner totally different from Maimonidean and scholastic-Gilsonian transcendentalism.<sup>37</sup> This passage (Ex. 3:14) deals with the very concrete presence of God within the lower world and history. In many cases, which become more and more prominent in modern Hasidism, this divine name has been interpreted as pointing to God's dependence on human action, just as a mirror image depends on the person looking into the mirror. The Maimonidean interpretation attracted the attention of Christian theologians and mystics, and of Steiner, while the correlational interpretations have been more widespread among Jewish thinkers.

Beyond these theological considerations one might also say that modern-day Christian Europeans have a mistaken understanding of biblical theology since they never read it in the original. Furthermore, even if they had it in the Hebrew, they would not easily find the abstract God. Nevertheless, Steiner may be right. Though I do not believe that it is the ancient Israelites who created the burden—they were poor theologians of the abstract but quite competent shapers of the concrete religious life—modern perceptions stemming from both Jewish and Christian theological, philosophical, and artistic circles could indeed instill such a perception in European consciousness. This is obvious from, for example, the manner in which Arnold Schoenberg,

a great composer and Zionist and one of the major sources for Steiner's negative theology, depicts the Jewish God as if he paraphrases Pseudo-Dionysios.<sup>38</sup> Whether a theology like this has a common soil in Judaism is a totally different story, demanding another history of Jewish thought than that proposed by Steiner. Before leaving this complex issue let me point out that desolation, tragedy, silence, blankness, and abstract transcendence may easily constitute a coherent modern Jewish experience among the desolates in Vienna and Prague.<sup>39</sup> Some of their contemporary Jews adopted other concepts and beliefs, however, like that of speaking a vital language, joy, and the feeling of immediate presence and intimate immanence. These values were dominant in numerous Hasidic circles active in other parts of the former Habsburg Empire. Both parts were Jewish—numbers and practice apart—and historically speaking there is no need to prefer one of them or to simplify the complexity of what “Jewish” may mean by turning it into a metaphor, which eventually becomes a burden. In any case, the metaphorical utopian Jew has been both privileged and displaced in Steiner's picture of the historical forms of Judaism and the concrete Jews.

#### DISLOCATION AND JEWISH HIGH CULTURE

Some of the Jewish intellectuals of the last generation, such as Arthur Koestler, Arnaldo Momigliano, and, last but not least, Steiner himself, have opted *de facto* for a life of peregrination. They chose the diasporic experience not as a given, or as a commodity, or as inertia, as the vast majority of Jews living in the Diaspora do—though some few of them hope to move sometime in the indefinite future to the land of Israel—but, rather, transformed their personal choice into an ideal. In more recent years this approach has also been adopted by Daniel Boyarin, again on grounds of principle. Most of these individuals have advanced arguments that are not related to, or at least not primarily related to, economic concerns or problems of social and linguistic adjustment or political quandaries. Rather, they have advanced theories about the blessings of the diaspora experience for intellectual creativity. After a long period when Zionist insistence on the “negation of the Exile” was dominant, a new trend is slowly crystallizing as a reaction to this ideological negation of creativity in the Diaspora. Some of those, like Koestler and Boyarin, who negate the negation are well acquainted with the Israeli experience; others, much less so. As a negation of an ideology, it is often turned into another ideology. I do not wish here to address the ideological aspects of this understanding; instead I wish to examine its cultural aspects as found in two major figures: Arnaldo Momigliano and Steiner.

In a memorable passage, the great Jewish historian Arnaldo Momigliano describes the protagonists of his main scholarly enterprise, the major Greek historians, as follows: "To acquire and convey his knowledge and wisdom, the historian had to detach himself from the surrounding society. In Greece the 'great' historians were almost invariably exiles or at least expatriates."<sup>40</sup> The fascinating aspect of this passage is not only its acute awareness of the affinity between distance and creativity but also, in my opinion, the fact that this statement also applies to the life of its formulator, Momigliano himself. He, too, was an expatriate, not from the land of Israel but from Italy, the place he conceived all his life to be his motherland, despite the events of the Holocaust in which his mother perished. He did all this without denying for a single moment his allegiance to Judaism as his religion, his interest in its culture, and his contribution to the study of its ancient and modern history. To be sure, these expatriates might have written outside the perimeters of the loci they describe or avoided contact with their protagonists. However, they never lost their intimate contact with the language that was shared by them and the groups and cultures they described. Whether written only by expatriated historians or not, the whole of Greek historical literature has been written and preserved almost solely in Greek. Momigliano strove to distinguish between religion and nationalism, assuming that he was an Italian of Jewish denomination, and he was very proud of the hyphenated identity of a Piemontese Jew. Recently such a hyphenated identity also became evident in the case of Jacques Derrida.

Though Steiner was fascinated by a similar diasporic propensity, he does not subscribe to any form of hyphenated identity. He emphasized repeatedly his uprootedness and the importance of mobility, and for this purpose mentioning his Jewish identity suffices. No doubt this approach has to do with the mobility of his clairvoyant father, who was able to save his family from the fate of other Jews by moving farther and farther to the West. No passion is spent on places. Steiner, like Momigliano, extrapolates from his personal experience of moving from one country to another in a case of the most extreme emergency to something that may indeed be only scarcely related to it: polyglotism, intellectual openness, and creativity. But unlike Momigliano, who felt he had a motherland and repeatedly visited it, Steiner did not. He emphasizes other images: that of a guest, of a courier, or of a cosmopolitan.<sup>41</sup> For him, these images represent the essential ingredients of the *condition juive*. Since he emphasizes the ideal of guesthood to a very marked degree, Steiner must be a perfect guest. He himself once referred to the concept of the privileged guest. This needs a special effort from him, especially when the dominant culture he cultivates is so problematic as a host, to judge from his own diagnosis as quoted

above. However, I wonder if it would not be as fruitful to teach Jews to be better, if not perfect, hosts than to prefer that they cultivate hospitality over pleasures stemming from a continual state of depending on the “kindness of strangers,” to resort to the name of an innovative book of history. I assume that when more and more people will become perfect hosts, it will be much easier to educate more perfect guests. In any case, the emphasis on the importance of Jews as guests playing the role of educators is indeed reminiscent of the mission some modern Jewish thinkers attribute to the concept of exile as a mission to the world.<sup>42</sup> Thus, it negates another, much more widespread, traditional Jewish hope that Jews will leave the exile and gather in their own land.

At the same time, as fascinated as Steiner is by a mobile life, he is also fascinated by stasis in culture, as we have seen in the passage from *The Death of Tragedy* cited above. This was also a preoccupation of Momigliano, who described Judaism as it was crystallized by the rabbis as follows: “The whole development of Judaism led to something ahistorical, eternal, the Law, the Torah. . . . History had nothing to explain and little to reveal to the man who meditated the Law day and night.”<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere, when discussing the manner in which his friend Joseph Levenson had studied traditional Chinese culture, he wrote: “I cannot foresee history ever becoming a science of the permanent.”<sup>44</sup> For him history “is always a choice of facts fitting into a static or dynamic situation which appears worth studying.”<sup>45</sup>

What seems to me relevant is the fascination of the two theorists of expatriation concerning the static element found in culture. Momigliano wanted to save a tradition to which he once adhered—as we learn from his descriptions of childhood—from the teeth of history, which devours everything, interested as it is with dynamism. He knew this too well from his immersion in history as understood by the Greeks and as he practiced in his academic writings. However, what is conspicuous is the fact that he reduces Judaism to one basic activity: meditation. Steiner, too, creates a “Jewish spirit,” which unifies—in his opinion—Talmudic, kabbalistic, and his mid-European heroes in some shared emphasis on dialectics as this is embodied in commentaries. To a great extent, this is a mid-European Jewish self-understanding, reminiscent of Sigmund Freud’s answer to the question as to what will remain after the Jewish religion disintegrates. This, of course, is quite an imponderable answer, which is not fleshed out in Steiner’s writings, not least because in some of his discussions Jews serve as a metaphor. Devoid of their classical forms of religion, of the concept of being a nation and the unfeasibility of a state of their own, Jews become, for some of the desolates, an attitude, an aptitude, a metaphor, or an archetype. While Momigliano created quite a Platonic contemplative

Jewish tradition that transcends history, Steiner has been concerned with a dialectical spirit that brings together Jewish elites over centuries and continents.

These elite individuals are variants of the concept of Jews as the “People of the Book,” an idealized concept that is not without its serious difficulties. First and foremost, in the way in which it is understood it neglects what I see as the performative, ritualistic praxis so central to all the major forms of classical Judaism but forgotten by most of the enlightened modern Jews. Some scholars portray the Jews *en bloque* as living intense lives nourished by books, their content, corrections, and interpretations.<sup>46</sup> This is, to be quite generous, only half of the truth. Many more Jews, including the Jewish elites, performed throughout most of Jewish history the biblical and rabbinic commandments, procreated, and were deeply involved in communal life no less than the study of sacred books. After all, even study is not always for its own sake but, in fact, has much to do with knowing what to do. Just as Jewish theology, including the theology of transcendence, is something like a reification having strong Greek and Christian overtones, so, too, is the concept of Judaism as a religion or culture gravitating around books alone.<sup>47</sup> It is an exaggeration because it neglects the content of the books as sources inspiring a specific way of life. It betrays the special interest of a Jewish modern elite, which ignores the impact of a life of performance on the spirit of many more Jews than those immersed in studies. Again, this is not a matter of quantity or elite culture versus mass culture, since almost all the traditional Jewish elites were concerned with issues like procreation, leadership, and communal activities no less than with studying. The question is therefore, Why reduce such a fertile complexity to the exigencies of modern sensibilities of a tiny Jewish elite? Why transform living realities into metaphors?<sup>48</sup> Why reduce the much richer substance of historical Judaism to an existence separated from most of what characterized the Jews for so many centuries and which characterizes many Jews today, a spirit that reflects, at its best, echoes of a totally different mentality and behavior?

Everyone is free to build his or her own Judaism as he or she will, and I gladly accept the emerging variety, with the single condition that it does not claim to constitute a historical constant that is anachronistically imposed on earlier forms that do not, in fact, fit it.<sup>49</sup> People, especially learned individuals, must take some public responsibility for their cultural innovations. The question that I see as haunting an informed reader of Steiner—that is, one who is also acquainted with some form of traditional Judaism—is: Why does Steiner not acknowledge that his theological contributions are based on Judaism instead of attributing them to oftentimes vague Jewish sources? This is not a matter of being selective: every theology represents a selection and

often quite a dramatic one. Steiner, without doubt a theologian, only rarely quotes those particular sources that he believes support his vision of Judaism.

To return to Steiner's "Jewish spirit," this is something that, though only rarely analyzed in detail, plays a central role in his approach. As pointed out above, this concept allows him to bring together such varied cultural and intellectual phenomena as Kafka, the desolates, the Talmud, and the writings of the medieval kabbalists.<sup>50</sup> Such a unifying category, in most of the instances where he resorts to it, does not provide a persuasive argument as it is too amorphous and imprecise.<sup>51</sup> This is not a totally new approach. Anyone acquainted with Gershom Scholem's writings will find parallel statements according to which Kafka is something like a secular kabbalist.<sup>52</sup> In a way, Scholem re-created a vision of Kabbalah that is reminiscent of Kafka, just as Steiner re-created the Jewish spirit in order to fit the dead desolates (two mid-European re-creations of Judaism in the image of the interwar Jewish cosmopolitan twilight, where negativity, silence, absence, tragedy, and transcendence displace the more general daily emphasis on an abundance of life and language, joy, and immanentism that are characteristic of some phases of Judaism and many forms of Jewish mysticism). There is nothing sinister in comparisons between Kafka and Judaism or Kabbalah. The only problem is that no specific elaborations follow such a comparison and innocent readers, already knowing Kafka's literary genius, attribute his unparalleled achievements and negativities to the much poorer and less dialectical kabbalistic writings, which were, however, much more optimistically oriented.<sup>53</sup> A reasoned comparison between the two modalities will discover major divergences between two drastically different forms of "Jewish spirit."

Unlike Steiner, I am not too confident about my capacity to define anything like a "Jewish spirit," and I therefore feel uncomfortable about any reification of such a spirit active over centuries, continents, and languages, some form of a "spiritual angel" of the Jews, to translate the Hebrew phrase *Sar ha-'ummah*. I suggest that one sees far more ruptures and differences, including sharp ones, between the various strata of Jewish thought and culture, despite the stasis I mentioned above. Accordingly, Kafka and the other desolates constitute, in my opinion, a specifically Jewish type of culture that is not only less continuous with an alleged Jewish spirit but also less antagonistic to or rebellious against anything specific. It is just different, and it is Jewish, since most of those desolates wanted to belong to Jewish culture in one way or another, sometimes openly expressing this desire. Thus, *inter alia*, they contributed, as we learn from Steiner's analysis of their sensitivities, the importance of silence as a reaction, something I see as marginal in the earlier forms of Judaism. Nothing, however, precludes

silence from representing a new factor in the ever-changing mosaic of Judaism. As such, Steiner's own emphasis on the category of silence may be described as an additional contribution to a new and slowly developing sensitivity in modern Judaism. It deals with the attitude of Jews toward crises and disasters, when the earlier tools of rituals, remembrance, or even historical documentation are no longer sufficient. However, even when one willingly admits this, one should nevertheless have at least a tentative map of what is old and new, what is more representative than something else, and should avoid simplistic understandings of complex phenomena.

In fact the incidental traveling that has been imposed from outside on most Jews against their will has incorrectly been turned by Steiner into some form of idealized essence. Being an antiessentialist insofar as Jewish matters are concerned, I must point out that side by side with the many wandering Jews—one of whom, the kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, I have written about at length—were more eminent Jews who were quite often sedentary figures, and their contribution was just as lasting and even greater. Such a list could start with Philo of Alexandria; would include the mid-sixteenth-century prolific kabbalist R. Moshe Cordovero, who was active in Safed; and might end with R. Elijah, known as the Gaon of Vilna. This is just a small and incomplete list of three paragons of Jewish culture, active over centuries, in three different continents. This list, to be sure, could be easily expanded. However, what is significant is the fact that when comparing one of the most creative phases in the history of Kabbalah, the mid-sixteenth-century Safedian literature, to the earlier phase, we can learn something about a dynamics of culture different than that surmised by Steiner. In the post-Expulsion period, namely, between 1492 and 1540, the mobile kabbalists who were expelled from Spain and Portugal and who roamed in different countries in southern Europe and northern Africa produced a vast, quite traditional, and not very original kabbalistic literature. With the establishment of the center of Kabbalah in Safed in the forties of the sixteenth century, where groups of kabbalists lived and created together for an extended period of time, an explosion of creativity took place. It is the sedentary, collective life of those circles that generated the basic kabbalistic writings that have inspired much of Jewish spiritual life since then.<sup>54</sup> Jews were Ahashve-roees in Christian legends and in the fate that Christianity forced upon many Jews. But few Jews ever imagined wandering to be anything more than a curse. To say otherwise is, from a historical point of view, sheer anachronism. Jews were no closer to the concept of the *homo viator* than medieval Christians or Muslims.

The main gist of my argument, however, is not only a historical one. A Jew who offers an idiosyncratic vision of Judaism as a peripatetic

enterprise does not stop being Jewish, even if that person thinks he or she has. Though anachronistic insofar as most of the forms of Judaism that I am acquainted with, Steiner's vision of Judaism may, in principle, move from the margin to the center, at least in some circles, and may qualify historical Judaism and enrich it by conceptualizing a new historical condition. My question has to do more with Steiner's insistence that the text is the Jews' homeland, on the one hand, and his emphasis on the importance of mobility, on the other.<sup>55</sup> Without entering into the question as to the identity of the text that was addressed in the polemical reappraisal by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, let me merely point out the possibility that being absorbed in studying texts may also cause a quite unintended result.<sup>56</sup> In my opinion, it is precisely because some Jewish elites were so concerned with studying texts for part of their religious life that geographical mobility became much less important. If the homeland may be a text, someone is always at home with or without any kind of geographical dislocation. Books, by their nature, represent the very opposite of the readers' necessity to travel: they are traveling to us, and we can then travel to distant places through them. The hard work of bringing a book from one place to another was not the prerogative of the top intellectual elite. More often than not there were Jewish merchants who rotated between different Jewish centers, bringing books with them to sell. It is amazing to learn the huge number of kabbalistic books that R. Moshe Cordovero was able to read in the emerging center of Safed, far away from the places where they were written in Western Europe, without leaving this small town. The mind was able to feast without needing feet long before the new forms of media turned everyone into a cosmopolitan. Whether or not we accept a mental vision of Judaism as an essentially book-oriented culture, the lives of most of the main Jewish thinkers demonstrate the insignificance of the reader's mobility. Creativity and a critical acumen do not belong to the movement of feet but, I suspect, depend infinitely on the movement of the mind. Alternatively, if someone needs not actual migration but a feeling of expatriation, then one can easily be an expatriate while living in one's own birth town. Feelings depend mostly on the soul, not on the feet.

Did Kant, after all, lack creativity because he was quite a sedentary figure who lived all his life in Königsberg? Or, perhaps, is it that the experience of a Gentile is not relevant, and only Jews have to circulate in order to be creative?<sup>57</sup> Let us take then an Israeli example. The most accomplished of the polyglots and cosmopolitans I have met or heard about, a person who mastered many, many languages and dozens of major cultures and literatures, was the late Professor Shlomo Pines, who spent the vast majority of his last fifty years in one city, Jerusalem. He did not travel more than any ordinary Israeli university professor,

a fact that did not preclude his unparalleled knowledge of the entire range of modern European culture, of Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, and Christian literatures and their speculative corpora (this is only a partial list). Many would testify that his critical acumen was not weakened by this long sojourn in a national state, basically in one embattled city; nor did he become a nationalist. Neither did he ever proclaim himself to be cosmopolitan. In any case, his cosmopolitanism was broad enough to include also Hebrew and Israeli literature and culture. Accomplished scholars from various religions and cultures were his students, including Muslim ones coming to study Arabic philosophy in Arabic with him. Many benefited from his immense knowledge, as well as from his generous hospitality and constant encouragement. Like Steiner, he scarcely escaped Paris but chose another route, the eastern one, without turning his choice or life into an ideology or a passion. This example, extraordinary as it is, illustrates the simple fact that states are not monolithic entities and that passing general judgments on millions of people is rarely helpful in understanding at least some of them.

Steiner, like some other major Jewish intellectuals, is skeptical about the possibility that a state, even one built by the Jews, can advance beyond narrow nationalism, and he has emphasized the danger that a national state may draw and enhance external hatred. As to the first danger, there can be no doubt that state structures may encourage an emphasis on nationalism, and modern Israel is no exception to this danger. Even major Jewish intellectuals in Europe succumbed to this impulse, in circumstances in which such nationalistic impulses may appear totally bizarre today. This is the reason why a diaspora existence provides no better remedy to nationalism than an actual state. It depends far more on someone's own inclination. So, for example, Martin Buber, known as a leftist with respect to Israeli politics, took quite a nationalistic attitude insofar as World War I was concerned. In any case, I scarcely know greater Jewish nationalists than those coming from the only nonnational democratic state in the world: the United States. Matters of spirit do not depend on where one's feet are standing but on how fast and profoundly one's mind is thinking.

The enormity of the Holocaust transcends by far even the annihilation of six million Jews. Those who survived it paid an immense price their entire lives. Some of the intellectuals chose the final solution of suicide: Walter Benjamin, Primo Levi, Paul Celan, Peter Szondi, and Jerzy Kosinski. Interestingly enough, all were successful writers living and dying in Europe, with the exception of Kosinski. None of them was an Israeli. Moreover, those like Steiner who did not experience the ordeals are not exempted from being, nevertheless, a kind of survivor. Indeed, it is not easy for anyone to understand the

desolates, and it is especially difficult for those who have lived their entire lives in calm centers of learning. In light of this fact, Steiner's effort to pay special attention to this part of Jewish European culture is very salutary. He sympathizes with those writers who either were neglected by the stark Zionist denial of assimilation or were rejected by Jewish orthodox circles who considered such writers as totally outside the realm of Judaism. Steiner attempts to restore to them a kind of Jewishness that he then appropriates to a certain extent for himself, and he distills it into elements that constitute an even more general vision of culture.

The need to describe and preserve the destroyed Jewish culture in general, in Yiddish, Hebrew, Ladino, and any other languages (and not only that of the desolates), both haunts and daunts. In order to do justice to the complexity of Jewish culture far more massive processes have to be put to work, which only states can afford. Nevertheless, the phantoms of a culture created by Jews who attempted to integrate, to assimilate, to disguise, or even to eradicate their relation to Judaism are stronger now in European culture and have attracted the interest of some Jewish intellectuals in Europe and America. They prefer to analyze the quantitatively small elite culture composed in a European language by other Jews, whose experience and achievements may teach them about their own situation today as a minority and as a creative elite. It also saves them the effort, at least in many cases, that would be involved in studying Hebrew and in acquiring more sophisticated understandings of the historical forms of Judaism.

However, in order to ensure the understanding of the many, not only of the very few, balanced cultural strategies that are less ideological and partisan must be employed. Otherwise, we might ignore the real picture of the millions of Jews in history, in culture, or in suffering. The study of the performance of elites will show that, unfortunately, with the exception of the Zionist elite, all the other Jewish elites could perform much better during the Holocaust. Steiner's father's clairvoyance was a rare and happy exception. Knowing this, it would be better, unlike the medieval inquisitors, to care more for the body of living Jews as hosts before worrying about their Jewish spirits as theoretically perfect guests.

#### DISCONCERTING PROPHECIES OR A FOURTH BURDEN

Critiques, like lives, are more meaningful when examined. Let me therefore attempt to examine some possible implications of Steiner's philosophy of culture. In Steiner's insightful remark that was quoted in a fuller manner at the beginning of this article, we read: "The idiosyncratic

world image, without an orthodox or public frame to support it, is kept in focus only by virtue of the poet's present talent. It does not take root in the common soil." No doubt Steiner is blessed with the virtue of an extraordinary rhetorical presence. However, given our assumption that the categories he proposed are still relevant in modern times, and that the cultural stasis is even longer than he conceived it to be, the question may be asked: What is the common soil that may perpetuate the achievements of this exuberant talent in the future? The poet, the artist—and Steiner incarnates much of them in himself—must look for a common soil in order to survive. Otherwise, he or she may become something of an inspired provocateur.

Steiner strove to propose a phenomenology of the Jewish spirit based on his analyses of the writings of some extraordinary and creative Jewish authors in Central Europe.<sup>58</sup> Drawing from Kafka, Freud, and Scholem, Steiner tried, in the same way as some of his contemporaries, to offer, as Harold Bloom pointed out, a new Torah.<sup>59</sup> His assumption that mobility, a sense of instability, uprootedness, and a sense of multiculturalism and polyglotism are conditions for cultural creativity requires an immediate qualification: What type of culture? After all there are many cultures, both Jewish and non-Jewish, in which main elements such as particularism and universalism, individualism and collective life, elite and mass culture, play different roles. Antiessentialist as I am, I do not see the automatic gains of cosmopolitanism over particularism. The difference is quite relative. Cosmopolitanism, as it has been described above, is little more than the particularistic vision of the European majority in different Christian countries. It is, for the time being, basically a quantitative phenomenon. To use this criterion, Jewish particularistic propensities have been formulated and propagated in geographical areas many times wider than what may be called a cosmopolitan culture, which basically includes some parts of Europe and those locations that show strong European cultural influence. But it is not the quantitative criterion that really matters: it is the very assumption, accepted *de facto* not only declared *de jure*, that there is something of absolute value that transcends the particularistic cultures. The Holocaust is the most convincing proof of the huge problems involved in such an assumption.

While little accepted and even less put into practice by significant parts of humanity, a cosmopolitan culture is a desperate effort of a courier to bring together different recipients who agree only on some few overlapping issues. Or, to put it in different terms, the strong particularistic tendencies evident in the major forms of cultures today, Christian, Muslim, Chinese, Hindu, and Jewish, render the cosmopolitan ideal little more than a fascinating dream. The common soil is not prepared. Steiner may be one of the few giants ready to make an unusual

effort to till this soil. For this reason he passionately preaches for a circumstance that transcends geographical borders, national identities, and, implicitly, even the importance of most of the main languages in which Jewish culture has operated. For the vast majority of Jews, this utopian demand is beyond their will and their intellectual capacity and, I suspect, also beyond the willingness of their hosts to accept. This is the main problem that Steiner does not address at all, and no alternative to actual Jews can be envisioned realistically in his writings. He does deal with the high mandarin culture, which might have an impact on other non-Jewish elites but hardly on the vast masses of the Jews, and it was those masses that suffered more than all the few desolate geniuses. In a way, those concrete masses of Jews, whose lives in compact ghettos and whose studying and suffering together sharpened, according to Steiner, the spirits of the few Jews, are supposed to suffer because of the spiritual enterprises of some of the elite Jews. Suffering and learning have also an economy and sociology that it is important to address. How are those individual, half-assimilated Jews, spread all over the world, to maintain what Steiner calls “the Jewish spirit” without returning to the kind of intense study characteristic of institutions created by the substantial concentration of Jewish population? Are those “cosmopolitan” intellectuals capable of perpetuating the volatile “Jewish spirit” by any concrete mechanism that is discernible? Or is there some mystical assumption that this spirit conserves itself without specific Jewish institutions, collectives, or communities? And how long is it possible to imagine that such preservation will linger, even in the Anglo-Saxon cultures in the United Kingdom and United States?

But it was not only the Jewish masses who failed to react properly to the dangers of the incredible behavior of their European hosts. The attempts to do so by the few Jewish intellectuals, who at times created a fascinating culture, were unfortunately insufficient. They lost contact with the larger Jewish community, were caught in a no-man’s-land, and sank in situations of personal desolation related to geographical displacement that culminated in some cases in suicide (Walter Benjamin, for example) or extermination. Those intellectuals were certainly not responsible for the tragic course of events that they or other Jews had to undergo, but neither did their contribution to the “general” culture do anything to prevent them or others from suffering. On the contrary, according to Steiner the very existence of Jewish “disturbing” contributions, the three burdens or blackmails that he has enumerated, triggered and perhaps exacerbated the murderous explosion against the Jews, imagined to embody the conscience of Europe.<sup>60</sup> Will Steiner’s sharp critique of European culture become a new, fourth, Jewish “burden” on Europe’s conscience? Can his preservation

of an abstract transcendentalism connected to a Jewish humanism that insists on continuing to operate in Europe despite the Shoah be seen as such a burden? Is his concept of guesthood, which creates the pressing condition of proximity between assimilated Jews and Christians who may not like their guests, not reminiscent of the view, formulated by Steiner, that one of the circumstances giving rise to the Shoah was too great a proximity between the two?<sup>61</sup> Will his various critiques (including perhaps that of Zionism) become the pretext for another attempt to do away with the Jews as the “bad conscience”?<sup>62</sup> Is the “privileged” “Jewish spirit” dramatically different from a vision of the election of the Jews found in classical traditional Jewish sources? Is the Zionist vision of normality and the equality that Jews rightfully possess relative to other human beings less noble an approach than the vision that the nations need the dispersed Jews in order to become properly educated persons?

If the answers to the questions above are positive, it will put Steiner in line with the Israelite ancient prophets, with Jesus, and with Marx, according to his perception of the contribution made by these figures. The question should be, however, to resort to Steiner’s own words, “When is clairvoyance also responsibility?” as he asked so insightfully about the presentiments of the coming catastrophe in the writings of the desolates from whom he learned so much.<sup>63</sup> If his cultural critiques should become very prominent and thus eventually a burden, is it possible that the price will be paid, according to the logic of his critique of culture, by many ordinary and innocent Jews? For them no possible solution is envisioned in his writings except to become wandering perfect guests with multiple passports and, if possible, also moral geniuses dealing with pure abstractions. But I suspect that by now most of them have no mission for the Gentiles—the last one that a Jew had long ago was not very successful from the Jews’ point of view—and that most would prefer instead to learn how to become just normal hosts. Maybe they need some time to do so. They may be as tired of the Gentiles as the latter are of the Jews, and they would like to avoid repeating the experience of the desolation of the desolates: just ordinary people, Jews without too high a culture, caring too much for their families to allow even the luxury of the desolates’ suicides. Inter alia, some of them learn Hebrew from their children and grandchildren; others create an entire culture in this language. Still others even attract some Gentile students and scholars to come every year from Japan and Germany, even from England and Switzerland, to learn about the Bible and other Jewish cultural issues, in Hebrew and several other languages, with no passion or mission involved.

Most of these Israelis also serve in the army for long periods of time. Their life is complex, full, and oftentimes difficult and should

not be simplified as a consequence of preconceived notions; nor again should their lives be understood as possessing value only insofar as they serve as missionaries to improve the world of the Gentiles, who are gifted enough without having to rely on the volatile Jewish spirit. I suspect that most of the Israelis are too busy building and creating their own little worlds—*horibile dictu*, their “belonging”—from the shattering experiences of the past and would defer even the honor of becoming common soil for a new mission. For the majority of Israeli Jews, who are now 40 percent of the Jewish people and who may soon become the vast majority of Jews who will keep some meaningful form of attachment to Judaism in the next generation, Steiner’s concept of the Jewish spirit is strange or volatile, especially when their accomplishments in matters of language and culture are systematically ignored by his vision of what the “Jewish spirit” is, and their lives are thereby reduced to an image of living only in a camp of arms, of commando teams, torturers, and, as described recently, the potential initiators of a third, now atomic, world war.

In a way, Steiner is the last major specimen of the mid-European desolates, and he brings all his many talents and sympathies to understanding those refined intellectuals who tried another way of life, a cosmopolitan and sometimes Jewish way of life, in the way in which he understands this last term. He also favors their artistic achievements in literature, music, and art in order to build a new critique of culture. Their difficulties are fascinating though very different from those of many other Jews, including all the orthodox varieties of Judaism, and from the experiences of most Israelis. Steiner, who so powerfully advanced and privileged the understanding of middle European Jewish elite culture, formulated generalizations that exclude the beliefs and intellectual experiences of the vast majority of Jews from his monolithic “Jewish spirit.”

Let me turn back to the possible implications of accepting this new critique of culture. According to Steiner’s logic of Western culture, six million Jews paid with their lives, and many others still continue to pay directly and indirectly by their suffering for some religious burden. He gave as the reasons for this the too-abstract nature of the three demands—or blackmails—put forward by some ancient prophets and the effect of two other Jewish figures, Jesus and Marx, on other nations and cultures.<sup>64</sup> I have addressed above the dilemmas involved in attributing an abstract transcendentalism to biblical theology, and I do not want to return to that topic here. Also, the assumption that Jesus and Marx were automatically identified with Judaism and Jews when both were, for the Christian, Christians needs some minimal proof, which Steiner did not supply. This is too crucial a point in his scheme and cannot be accepted before some hard sociological work is

invested. That does not mean that I am sure that Steiner is wrong, just that I see a fascinating thesis without the necessary supporting apparatus. Nevertheless, let us accept, for a moment, that this assumption is correct. If so, abstraction may, therefore, be a classical Jewish affair, bridging over time and place the spiritual propensities of ancient Jews with the moderns—though I doubt it.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, if we believe Steiner, abstraction that imposes itself on non-Jews may turn into an extraordinarily risky adventure. I would add that this is not because of the abstract thinkers themselves. Even Jesus did not die because of the abstraction but, rather, because he disturbed the public and religious order of both Jews and Romans, before the implications of Christianity could have been perceived. Marx was not put to death. Neither of these two historical figures, prophetic as they were, could have known the implications and dangers of his abstract message. They had what Steiner called in a similar context the “formidable privilege” of not knowing.<sup>66</sup> It is only Steiner who recently discovered this terrible secret by analyzing the religious reasons for the Holocaust. The three stages of “Jewish” blackmailers admonished, criticized, and even cursed, but they did not endanger anyone else in a conscious manner.

But Steiner, at last, knows what they did not and, according to him, could not know for millennia. He is not privileged by not knowing. I can understand the urgency a prophetic figure feels to castigate sinners by means of his theological “abstractions,” whatever the risk will be, in the name of a compulsive and concrete God. He has no choice since he is a possessed emissary or a fully divine entity, and nevertheless he did not yet know the price of his, of his God’s, theological abstraction on the lives of others. Steiner himself, if he takes his theory of culture seriously, must know. If we follow the logic of his theory, then a new abstraction, coming from a new prophet, one who glorifies the importance of living in close proximity with Jews who emphasize the new model and with Gentiles less willing to follow it, may inflict a new catastrophe.<sup>67</sup> It may only be a matter of time. One who knows Steiner’s thought better than I do described him as a “taker of risks”—but those were risks of his own.<sup>68</sup> None of them has been terribly perilous from a personal point of view; most of them have brought him exposure, some controversy, and much fame.

However, if Steiner’s theory of culture is correct, the question may be asked: Does he consciously risk the lives of others? Does he believe, as he put it once, that “truth knows no circumstances” and that “even death can be made mute.”<sup>69</sup> I do not know the answer; I have only a question. Nevertheless I suspect that the three burdens or blackmails on European consciousness are, for Steiner, the “common soil,” some form of *preparatio evangelica* for the acceptance of his own Jewish “proximist” humanitarian message, based upon the will of the hosts to

allow a privileged guest to blackmail them once again. After all, following Freud, Steiner assumes that it is advisable to start to love again instead of being ill.<sup>70</sup> This is certainly one kind of solution, though I would judge it more a noble than a practical one and not without a certain affinity to Christianity. Another solution, which will avoid both love and hatred, would be simply an act of disentanglement. But this solution will assume a kind of normality that will destroy what Steiner thinks is the mysterious destiny of the Jews' nonbelonging, some form of fatality of the Jewish-Christian relationship.<sup>71</sup> Instead of one of the major myths of Judaism—the communal responsibility of Jews to each other, the concept of *kelal Israel*—Steiner proposes a fascinating opposite view, based on a much more individualist activity. According to him, the Jews belong most especially to mankind in general. Any attempt to create a concentrated, significant community, such as the State of Israel, may represent an erosion of the alleged classical Jewish mission to the Gentiles, de facto leaving the Christians alone.

If, hypothetically, the fourth burden will unleash a new pogrom, that may serve, according to Steiner's assumption, as a new occasion to reeducate the killers.<sup>72</sup> I do not know how heavy Steiner's fourth burden is, or may become, for the spirit of the European Christians. I nevertheless guess that if Steiner's history of culture is correct, for many Jews living on the Old Continent it may become an extraordinary burden on their bodies, based on the "logic of intensification."<sup>73</sup> I can hardly imagine a better characterization of such a modern mission for the Gentiles than having a suicidal propensity, not for Steiner, to be sure, but, to judge in accordance to Steiner's theories, for the Jewish communities in Europe that may now suffer from hypothetical reactions provoked by this fourth burden.<sup>74</sup> But what will be new in this, let me repeat, totally hypothetical instance is the fact that Steiner may be the first among those Jews who created the intellectual and moral burdens who is also aware of the possible noxious potential of his theory and deeds on the Jews. Would he agree that what he wrote about the three burdens, "the insistence of the ideal continued, with a terrible, tactless force," is not only a matter of the horrible past but also a potential for the future?<sup>75</sup> If so, the potential for tragedy is not dead even in modern times in the very opus of the author of *The Death of Tragedy*. Will Steiner be burdened in some way or just delighted to learn that he added a fourth burden? Or is a "mandarin fantasy" beyond those modest considerations?<sup>76</sup> Would he be content with the status of observing culture, or would he strive to shape it regardless of the potential danger that may haunt such an enterprise, on the basis of his understanding of the past?

Reading Steiner one may discern a positive answer to these hypothetical dangers that colors his thought with a tragic tone—with one

major exception: his confidence that the Jewish spirit will survive in the Diaspora even if the State of Israel were to be destroyed. A somewhat more optimistic wish would imagine that this spirit might survive there even when the state flourishes. Diversity, rather than an abstract monolithic understanding of Jewish culture or spirit, not only is intellectuality more interesting and more true to the historical record but, sociologically speaking, is also more viable. However, this is a cultural-historical observation rather than a prophetic one.

HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

#### NOTES

1. After this article was finished, an interesting article was published by Sagiv; see Assaf Sagiv, "George Steiner's Jewish Problem," *Azure* (summer 2003), pp. 130–154. Some of his conclusions are similar to some of my arguments in the last part of this article, though he refers also to other elements in Steiner's opus.

2. George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London, 1961), pp. 322–323. The title seems to point to a pun on Nietzsche's *The Birth of the Greek Tragedy*. Steiner's vision is influenced by that of the German philosophers. Compare also the concept of *stasis* that occurs in George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford, 1975), p. 466. See also below.

3. See Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, trans. A. Arkush, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton, 1987).

4. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 320.

5. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, pp. 351ff.

6. See George Steiner, "A Season in Hell," in *In Bluebeard's Castle* (London, 1971), pp. 34–48.

7. I use here an Internet version of the speech (<http://www.iprs.ed.ac.uk/trans/steiner/sl.html>).

8. Steiner, "A Season in Hell," pp. 47–48 (see also pp. 31–32).

9. George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London, 2001), p. 119.

10. Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 332.

11. While I was writing this article, Carolyn W. Bynum presented a paper, "The Matter of Memorial: Vestiges of Medieval Anti-Jewish Charges in Modern Germany," on May 2, 2003, at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Bynum presented a disturbing picture of the return of medieval anti-Jewish ideas and images in the modern German context.

12. George Steiner, *Entretiens* (Paris, 2002), pp. 140–141.

13. George Steiner, "K.," in *Language et silence* (Paris, 1969), p. 135.

14. This approach brings Steiner very close to some Jewish ultraorthodox explanations of the Holocaust that view it as a consequence of Jewish assimilation.

15. See George Steiner, "Je suis un survivant," in *Langage et silence* (Paris, 1969) p. 149. From time to time some of those figures are described as tragic. It should be mentioned that "desolate," "tragic," and "prophetic" are modes that are oftentimes related to each other both in ancient scriptures and in Steiner's discussion of the modern arena of Central Europe.

16. Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 233. See also the German origin of the phrase *Kulturpessimismus* in George Steiner, "In a Post-culture," in *In Bluebeard's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven, 1971), p. 57.

17. George Steiner, "Tomorrow," p. 87.

18. See Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, pp. 232–233; and George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York, 1971), p. 72. See also Susan A. Handelman, *Fragments of Redemption, Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, Levinas* (Bloomington, IL, 1991), pp. 16–20.

19. On Steiner and silence in Jewish contexts, see the interesting and helpful analysis of Edith Wyschogrod, "The Mind of the Critical Moralist: Steiner as a Jew," in *Reading George Steiner*, ed. Nathan A. Scott Jr. and R. A. Sharp (Baltimore, 1994), pp. 171–174.

20. Quoted in Steiner, "K.," p. 132.

21. George Steiner, "La silence de la poete," in *Langage et silence*, p. 80.

22. George Steiner, *Errata*, trans. P. E. Dauzat (Paris, 1998), p. 98.

23. Compare this to Steiner's general remarks in *After Babel* (p. 160) on future tense and survival. His description could easily be applied to the renaissance of Hebrew.

24. See Moshe Hallamish, "On Silence in Kabbalah and Hasidism" (Heb.), in *Religion and Language*, ed. Moshe Hallamish and Asa Kasher (Tel Aviv, 1981), pp. 79–89. See also Steiner, *Entretiens*, p. 65.

25. Implicitly, Steiner himself has recognized this. See the resort to Christian examples drawn from mystical literatures, dealing with silence, in his *After Babel* (p. 63).

26. See Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, NY, 1995), pp. 215–218.

27. See Steiner, *Errata*, pp. 208 ff.

28. See Steiner, *Errata*, p. 184.

29. George Steiner, "Le miracle creux," in *Langage et silence*, pp. 95–113.

30. See Steiner, "A Season in Hell"; and more recently, *chantages*, in George Steiner and Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Entretiens*, p. 65. See also George Steiner, "Proofs," in *The Deeps of the Sea*, pp. 343–344; and George Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.," in *The Deeps of the Sea* (London, 1996), pp. 143–145.

31. See also George Steiner, "Cakes," in *The Deeps of the Sea*, p. 219.

32. Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 40: "abstract monotheism." See also Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 41: "pure abstraction"; and p. 38: "the single, unimaginable, rigorously-speaking 'unthinkable,' God of the Decalogue." Or see Steiner, *Entretiens*, p. 65: "le monotheisme dont le Dieu est abstrait au possible."

33. See especially the poignant and convincing critique in Eliezer Berkovits, "The Concept of Holiness," in *Essential Essays on Judaism*, ed. David Hazony (Jerusalem, 2002), pp. 247–314.

34. Gershom Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, ed. A. Shapira, trans. Jonathan Chipman (Jerusalem, 1997), p. 140. I cannot enter here into a detailed analysis as to why such a view may apply to only a small number of Kabbalistic texts. See Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: On Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, 2002), pp. 272–289.

35. See Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1972), p. 35.

36. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), p. 3; Scholem, *On the Possibility of Jewish Mysticism in Our Time and Other Essays*, pp. 70–71.

37. See George Steiner, “The Great Tautology,” in *No Passion Spent Essays 1978–1996* (London, 1996), pp. 348–360. See, however, Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, p. 52. And see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 173–181.

38. See Steiner, “A Season in Hell,” pp. 36–37; and Steiner, “The Great Tautology,” p. 358.

39. I cannot enter here into an analysis of the connection between the silence and the blankness in a text, the last issue being treated several times by Steiner, also in connection to Jewish mystical traditions. See Steiner, *After Babel*, pp. 65, 297, 474; Steiner, *Entretiens*, p. 51; Steiner, “The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.,” p. 143; and Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, pp. 23, 113. I hope to do so in a future study.

40. Arnaldo Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Middletown, CT, 1977), p. 174.

41. The image of the cosmopolitan as guest is the most widespread. For the image of the guest, see George Steiner, “A Responsion,” in *Reading George Steiner*, ed. Nathan A. Scott Jr. and R. A. Sharp (Baltimore, 1994), p. 277; and Steiner, *Errata*, p. 80f. For the image of the courier, reminiscent of Kafka, see George Steiner, “Introduction,” in *George Steiner: A Reader* (New York), p. 21.

42. See George Steiner, “Our Homeland, the Text,” in *No Passion Spent Essays 1978–1996* (London, 1996), p. 327. For some earlier instances of this view, see Shalom Rosenberg, “Exile and Redemption in Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century: Contending Conceptions,” in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Bernard D. Cooperman (Cambridge, MA, 1983), pp. 399–430.

43. Arnaldo Momigliano, “Persian Historiography, Greek Historiography, and Jewish Historiography,” in *The Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (Berkeley, 1990), p. 23; see also the remark in Robert Chazan, “The Time-bound and the Timeless: Medieval Jewish Narration of Events,” *History and Memory*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1994), pp. 31–32.

44. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, p. 369.

45. Momigliano, *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, p. 367.

46. See, e.g., Steiner, “Proofs”; Steiner, *Entretiens*, p. 63; and for our special point here, Steiner, “Our Homeland, the Text,” p. 309, where he distinguishes between the contemplative act of studying and action. See also Wyschogrod, “The Mind of a Critical Moralist,” p. 167. Also, my recent book *Absorbing Perfections* makes the point that even in the small elite constituted of kabbalists, studying was strongly connected with magical, theurgical, and ecstatic operations and experiences.

47. See the pertinent remarks in Robert P. Carroll, "Toward a Grammar of Creation: On Steiner the Theologian," in *Reading George Steiner*, p. 267. Carroll's subtle and wise remarks on the differences between the overdetermined images of God in Jewish thought and the volatile transcendence of Steiner need much more explication. For more on the modern theologizing trend in modern scholarship, see Moshe Idel, "The Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship" (forthcoming).

48. See Steiner, "Proofs," p. 338. See also the quote from Kafka in Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 41; and Wyschogrod, "The Mind of a Critical Moralist," pp. 166–167, where she describes the concept of the Jew in Steiner as an archetype.

49. Curiously enough, from some points of view Steiner's vision of Judaism is closer to the views of the thirteenth-century prophetic kabbalist Abraham Abulafia, an exceptional figure in Judaism and in Jewish mysticism. His errant life and his emphasis on the importance of language, in his case Hebrew as a trans-Babel concept, on a new definition of Judaism, and on intellectual messianism bring him closer to Steiner. Steiner was aware of Abulafia's Kabbalah from reading Gershom Scholem's chapter on him in *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1974), and he refers to it, without mentioning his name, in *After Babel* (p. 61). See n. 52.

50. See, e.g., Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 65.

51. See, however, Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 4, where he sees in the Judaic spirit a belief that there is an order in the universe and that this order is accessible to reason. I agree in large measure with this characterization, though it misses the performative response to this understanding that is demanded in the biblical and rabbinic layers of literature. However, I wonder if this description is salient for the desolates. In principle, the influence of Leo Shestov, and even that of Benjamin Fondane, that Steiner recently acknowledges points to less a rationalistic approach than his early statement referred to here allows. See Steiner, *Entretiens*, pp. 62, 67, 130–131, where he subscribes to a nonrationalistic vision of Judaism as his own.

52. See Moshe Idel, "Hieroglyphs, Keys, Enigmas: On G. G. Scholem's Vision of Kabbalah: Between Franz Molitor and Franz Kafka," in *Arche Noah, Die Idee der "Kultur" im deutsch-juedischen Diskurs*, ed. B. Greiner and C. Schmidt (Freiburg, 2002), pp. 241–242. See also Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 65.

53. In many cases, Steiner, following to a certain extent Scholem, reifies Kabbalah as if it has some form of monolithic approach. See Steiner, *After Babel*, p. 61, where he attributes the view found in Abraham Abulafia's vision of language to the "kabbalist," leaving the impression that this is a common, widespread view, while in fact it is an exception. That strategy also transforms Kabbalah into a much more universalistic lore than it actually is. See also n. 48.

54. See Moshe Idel, "On Mobility, Individuals and Groups: Prolegomenon for a Sociological Approach to Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Kabbalah*, Vol. 3 (1998), pp. 145–176.

55. Steiner writes, "It is hard for me to understand why one must operate with an either/or alternative. Why can't someone have two motherlands or homelands at the same time, a bookish one and a geographical one. None of us is living in a utopian place, and no pure study of a book supplies someone

with his necessary living. People work in places and institutions. One may not like them, one may even be alienated from them, but this does not help very much concentrating and even less for creating a common soil. Neither does this create a nice atmosphere if this atmosphere of estrangement is taken too seriously. According to such a view, one should not marry, have children or friends, lest he succumb to a double type of relationship. Is not Heine's 19th century metaphor of the book as a homeland by a twentieth-century author simply going too far. Transportation, communication, and translations today are so dramatically different from Heine's time that one must take these factors into consideration before reifying his metaphor. Neither did I find a widespread trend in those forms of Judaism I am acquainted with, which may deal with the 'deeper truth of unhousedness, of an at-homeness in the world, which are the legacy of the Prophets and the keepers of the text' ("Our Homeland, the Text," p. 326). I fear that Steiner might have taken some expressions, hardly specified, which are descriptions of a forced diasporic Jewish existence, to represent an ideal.

56. Jonathan Sacks, "A Challenge to Jewish Secularism," *Jewish Spectator*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (summer 1990), p. 28.

57. See also "A Conversation Piece," in *The Deepes of the Sea*, p. 387.

58. For more on this issue, see Wyschogrod's treatment of Steiner in "The Mind of a Critical Moralist," pp. 155–159.

59. See Wyschogrod, "The Mind of a Critical Moralist," p. 163.

60. Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 36.

61. See the quote cited from the *New Yorker* (January 28, 1985, p. 92) in Mark Krupnik, "Steiner's Literary Journalism," in *Reading George Steiner*, ed. Nathan A. Scott Jr. and R. A. Sharp (Baltimore, 1994), p. 55.

62. On the Jews as the alleged bad conscience of Europe, see Krupnik, "Steiner's Literary Journalism," p. 41; as well as Steiner, "The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H." See also George Steiner, *The Deepes of the Sea*, pp. 143–145.

63. See again the citation quoted in Krupnik, "Steiner's Literary Journalism," p. 55. See also Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," p. 314.

64. For the existence of a prophetic voice in Steiner, see Ronald A. Sharp, "Steiner's Fiction and the Mode of Transcendence," in *Reading George Steiner*, p. 223.

65. See above my emphasis on the importance of religious performance, procreation, and communal life, which should dramatically qualify any abstract definition of Judaism as a historical phenomenon. If those issues are not concrete enough, the reader of Steiner may peruse the more recent descriptions of the Jews as "the people of the body" done in full-fledged treatments written by scholars in Jewish studies; see, e.g., Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley, 1993).

66. Steiner, "In a Post-culture," p. 65.

67. See the concept of modern "prophets of extremity," which fits also Steiner's radical positions, in, for example, Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida* (Berkeley, 1985).

68. See John Banville, "Introduction," in George Steiner, *The Deepes of the Sea*, p. X.

69. Steiner, "Proofs," p. 368; Steiner, "Tomorrow," p. 88.

70. Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 46.

71. Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," p. 326. It should be remarked that from many points of view, Steiner's stand represents a diametrically opposite view to that of the Israeli writer Abraham B. Yehoshua, formulated in his work *For Normality* (Tel Aviv, 1980 [Heb.]). A comparison between them reveals the differing assumptions of the two competing schemes.

72. See Steiner, *Entretiens*, p. 65.

73. See Steiner, "Tomorrow," p. 103.

74. See Steiner, "Tomorrow," p. 93, on books as the "society of the alone." Let me remind the reader that in traditional Jewish circles books are basically studied in groups and loudly, not in silence. See n. 23.

75. Steiner, "A Season in Hell," p. 41.

76. See Steiner, "Our Homeland, the Text," p. 325.