
George Steiner's *Errata* and T. S. Eliot's *Notes*

Junichi Saito

About three decades have passed since George Steiner published *In Bluebeard's Castle*. In this work, Steiner drew attention to the barbarism which has long indwelt the heart of European culture under the name of high human ideals.¹ Citing T. S. Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, he pointed out that Eliot did not seriously consider the hardships of the oppressed when he discussed culture. Steiner reiterated several times that Eliot's *Notes* is not an attractive book,² because Eliot does not stand for the position of the weak (or the minorities).

Steiner's literary achievements as a man of letters have been outstanding these last several decades. But many readers would like to know whether Steiner's views of western culture have changed or not during this time. It has generally been said that his childhood experience in Europe has sometimes cast a pessimistic shadow on his critical works. One might predict that there would be some change in his thoughts on the meaning of western culture now that he is reaching the age of seventy. It would be interesting to ask if Steiner's criticism of the insanity indwelling the heart of European culture has become even more harsh than before.

Steiner published *Errata* in 1997, and in it he reconsiders the significance of European culture in the light of his life experience; in particular,

he discusses the trauma of the Holocaust, that has long weighed upon his mind. He argues :

... the Shoah, the Holocaust is unique; whether or not it defines a singularity in the history of mankind. Perhaps it does. Perhaps there is no other instance, precisely analogous of ontological massacre—this is to say, of the deliberate murder of human beings whose guilt, minutely verbalized and set out by bureaucracy, was that of *being*. The millions of Jews beaten, burnt, tortured, marched, starved, gassed to extinction, the men and women drowned in cess-pits, the children thrown alive into fire, the old men hanged on meat-hooks, had committed the sole crime of existing. Even the fetus had to be torn out of the womb, lest there be even one Jew left to bear witness, to remember (though no one would believe him or her, a point the Nazis made with derisive logic). Are the American massacres, the genocide in Rwanda analogous? I do not know. What I do know is that the unspeakable technology of humiliation, torture, and butchery—merely to cite them is to scar and in some sense dehumanize language, as I tried to show in *Language and Silence* (1967)—arising out of an unresolved demonology and, it may be, self-hatred in European Christendom, created on this earth a material mirror-image of imagined Hell. Time and space were made static eternities of suffering in what the Nazis, unconsciously echoing Dante, called “the anus of the world” (Auschwitz).³

One might argue that the above passage seems to contain a tone of victim’s mentality, like that in *In Bluebeard’s Castle*. However, as the title of the book, *Errata* an examined life, indicates, Steiner in fact tries to scrutinize his own inner feelings by asking readers even harsher questions than have ever been posed before.

Has the survival of the Jew been worth the appalling cost? Would it not be

preferable, on the balance-sheet of human mercies, if he was to ebb into assimilation and the common seas? It is not only the horrors of our century, of the Hitlerite-Stalinist persecution and mass-murder of Jews which enforce the question. It is not only the midnight of man at Auschwitz. It is the aggregate of suffering since, say, the destruction of Jerusalem and the second Temple in A.D.70. It is the unending homicide, humiliation, pariahdom visited on Jewish men, women and children nearly every day, nearly every hour, in some quarter of the “civilized” world. As consuming—the long history of flame climaxing in the Shoah—as the actual violence, has been the fear, the degradation, the miasma of contempt, latent or explicit, which has stained Jewish lives in gentile streets, institutions, and courts of law (Shylock on his knees). What Jewish child, across the millenia, has not known the gamut of threats and derision, of exclusion or condescension which extends from blow, stones thrown, from being spat on, all the way to the urbane distaste, to the welcome “on sufferance” offered by the gentile? Every Jewish father is, at some point in his life and paternity, an Abraham to an Isaac on that unspeakable three-day journey to Mount Moriah.⁴

Steiner seems to want to examine Jewish history from the global perspective; he does not give such free rein to his passion as he did in *In Bluebeards Castle*. One might say that Steiner’s stance towards western culture is now more neutral, keeping away from a victim’s mentality. At the same time, Steiner takes a step forward to argue whether western culture would have come out the way it is now without the Jews. Steiner argues :

Yet how disproportionately radiant has been the Jewish contribution. That of the Hebrew Bible and of ethics which burgeon from it is incommensurable. For better or for worse, Rome and Mecca are the daughters (matricidal?) of Jerusalem. Consider only modernity and the climate of our

age. Cliché has it that this climate stems directly from Marx, Freud, and Einstein (though Darwin must, surely, be added). More than a hundred tongues characterize their bureaucracies, the gray anonymities, the neuroses of their social fabric by the name (usually made an adjective!) of Franz Kafka. The count of illustrious scientists, those visitors to Stockholm, who are Jews, at least in origin, is so above any statistical norm or expectation as to be gloriously embarrassing. Music has been provoked to radical rebirth by Schoenberg; anthropology by Lévi-Strauss; philosophy by Wittgenstein; economic theory by Kenneth Arrow. It is by the light of Proust that we descend the spiral staircase into the self (an image devised by the half-Jew, Montaigne). Any catalogue would be interminable and otiose. What is more difficult to articulate is the extent to which modernity *per se*, notably in the exemplary and dominant American vein, is so markedly “Jewish”. To a graphic extent, the mass-media, the humor, the fiscal and mercantile sinews of global enterprise which now threaten to homogenize the globe, are energies, vast arcs of electrifying shock, which have sprung out of emancipated Judaism.⁵

Steiner thus stresses Jewish contributions to western culture; he says, for example; “Can western history and culture do without its Jews?”⁶ Summing up, one might say that there is no oppressively pessimistic atmosphere arising out of a victim’s mentality, as there was in the earlier work. Steiner seems to be in a calmer and more serene stage of life after his earlier errors and wanderings.

Steiner’s tone reiterating the proud achievements of the Jews in the above-mentioned passage sounds curiously like Eliot’s stressing of Christianity in western culture. Eliot says in his *Notes* :

To our Christian heritage we owe many things beside religious faith.

Through it we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western World, through it we have our conceptions of private and public morality. And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literatures of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilizations of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent.⁷

In Steiner's *Errata*, then, there is no longer any harsh criticism of Eliot's views of culture of the kind found in *In Bluebeard's Castle* :

Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture: my subtitle is, of course, intended in memoration of Eliot's *Notes* of 1948. Not an attractive book. One that is gray with the shock of recent barbarism, but a barbarism whose actual sources and forms the argument leaves fastidiously vague.⁸

Steiner reiterates in this work that Eliot's *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* would be a more captivating work than it is if only Eliot would more openly consider the painful feelings of Jewish victims of the Holocaust, which was the product of the insanity and barbarism indwelling the heart of western culture. However, in *Errata*, Steiner seems to discuss historical events in the western world from a more objective point of view altogether. Steiner argues :

Alas, I cannot feel myself a party to a contract with Abraham. Thus I am no owner of a freehold, divinely countersigned, on some acre in the Middle-East—or anywhere else. It is the logical flaw in Zionism, a secular-political movement, to invoke a theological-scriptural mystique to which it

cannot, in avowed truth, subscribe. Nonetheless, the enigma, the singularity of the survival of the Jew after the Shoah, persuades me of a purpose. Israel is an *indispensable miracle*. Its coming into being, its persistence against military, geopolitical odds, its civic achievements, defy reasoned expectation. Today it looks with paradoxical satisfaction to normalcy: to the dosages of crime, corruption, political mediocrity, and vulgarities of the everyday which characterize nations and societies everywhere. Where Jeremiah thundered, there are topless bars. This precisely, is where I balk. It would, I sense, be somewhere scandalous (a word with a theological provenance) if the millennia of revelation, of summons to suffering, if the agony of Abraham and of Isaac, from Mount Moriah to Auschwitz, had as its last consequence the establishment of a nation-state, armed to the teeth, a land for the bourse and the mafiosi, as are all other lands.⁹

There is an idea among some historians that the building of the State of Israel in the land of Palestine is a necessary consequence of history for the Jews who went through the Holocaust in Europe. Yet there is no denying that even among the Jews some would disagree with such a view. It would be reasonable to argue, after all, that an oppressed nation has no brief to oppress others just because they were once oppressed in another part of the world.

Some might say that the oppressed have now turned out to be the oppressors in the land of Palestine, and Steiner himself would certainly wish to consider the situation of the oppressed Palestinians, deprived of their right to exist. One might say, then, that Steiner tries to analyze the significance of the State of Israel from a broad humanistic viewpoint. Steiner's viewpoint regarding non-Jewish "others" has something in common with Eliot's view of non-Christian's culture in his *Notes* :

... all we can do is to try to keep in mind that whatever we do will affect our own culture or that of some other people. We can also learn to respect every other culture as a whole, however inferior to our own it may appear, or however justly we may disapprove of some features of it: the deliberate destruction of another culture as a whole is an irreparable wrong, almost as evil as to treat human beings like animals.¹⁰

This passage might be taken as Eliot's own deep reflection on Nazi's persecution and genocide perpetrated on the Jews. If Steiner had tried harder to read between the lines in Eliot's *Notes*, he would have acquired different views on Eliot's idea of culture. It remains true, however, that Steiner shows a stronger consideration for the oppressed "others" than Eliot ever does. In other words, Steiner can be said to develop a more humanistic view of history in his series of critical works. Judging from Steiner's tone in *Errata*, he would seem to have reached a more mature stage of his life.

Notes

- 1 Gerald Graff, *Literature against itself* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 31.
- 2 George Steiner, *In Bluebeards Castle* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 31.
- 3 George Steiner, *Errata* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 118-119.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.
- 5 *Ibid.*, pp. 58-59.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 59.
- 7 T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York and London: Harcourt

- Brace & Company), pp. 200-201.
- 8 Steiner, *In Bluebeards Castle*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
 - 9 Steiner's *Errata*, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.
 - 10 Eliot, *op. cit.*, pp. 139-140.