

# Thirteen

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## BILL MOYERS' JOURNAL

### George Steiner on Literature, Language, and Culture

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## George Steiner on Literature, Language, and Culture

[Tease]

**BILL MOYERS:** What is there in literature that has been worth the great investment of your life in it?

**STEINER:** Oh, unquestionably, something which one can't paraphrase, and which is very dangerous. That the page in front of you, or the poem you learn by heart, or the play you've seen comes to possess you more than any other order of experience. That living things seem unreal compared to the intensity of the imaginative experience. I think that's the most exciting thing that can happen. Why do I say it's dangerous? Because like many other people too addicted to literature, I've often noticed in myself that the cry in the street seems mysteriously less powerful, less important, than the cry in the book, in the story. And that the tears that come over the great tragic scene have a bitter despair which after all should be elicited by what is happening in the city around us. So there is a danger. An imagination too utterly absorbed and fascinated by great art and literature can become autistic and whirl within its own very closed world. On the other hand, great art is probably our one constant, constant window on something much larger than ourselves.

**MOYERS [voice-over]:** Tonight, a conversation with George Steiner. I'm Bill Moyers.

[Bill Moyers' Journal opening]

**MOYERS [voice-over]:** George Steiner's title is Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College at Cambridge University in England, and Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Geneva. But those represent only part of the journey. When he lectures, as he does often on American campuses, you know George Steiner is man of many worlds who has lived his life in the company of multinational ideas. Born in 1929 on Shakespeare's birthday, he was prodigy at languages. Fluent as a child in German, the tongue of his Austrian parents, French — he first lived and went to school in Paris — and English, which the family spoke at home. When war broke out, the Steiners came to America. George became a naturalized citizen. He took his B.A. from the University of Chicago at the age of 19, received his Master's at Harvard, where he won the Bell Prize in American Literature, and studied poetry with Archibald MacLeish, then went off on a Rhodes scholarship to Oxford, to win the Chancellor's Essay Prize, and to earn his doctorate of philosophy. Since then, as prolific and daring essayist, he has become a formidable and controversial figure on the literary scene. Among his first works were *Tolstoy or Dostoevski*; *The Death of Tragedy*, a survey from the Greeks to Samuel Beckett. In *Language and Silence*, he explored the retreat from the word, our loss of belief in language, while enduring "a deluge of print which in itself may be a subversion of meaning." In *Bluebeard's Castle* grew from Steiner's T.S. Eliot memorial lectures in Canterbury. He speculated upon the Holocaust as culture's war on the idea of a monotheistic God, and wrote, "The wide-scale reversion to torture and mass murder, the ubiquitous use of hunger and imprisonment as political means, mark not only a crisis of culture, but quite conceivably an abandonment of the rational order of man." In *After Babel*, Steiner confronted the significance of the newly-evolving sciences of language for the theory of translation and the study of literature: "Even more than the linguists, and long before them, poets and translators have worked inside the time-shaped skin of human speech and sought to elucidate its deepest springs of being." *On Difficulty*, a collection of essays, and a clarification of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger are his latest works, along with the recently reprinted volume of three short stories, *Anno Domini*, dealing with the aftermath of World War II. George Steiner is not only a scholar of linguistic philosophy, but a man whose intellect roams the vast array of literature in search of meaning, connections, and irony. Once an editor for *The London Economist*, and a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, he is now among other things, principal literary critic of *The New Yorker*. He was in town the other day after lecturing at Princeton, and we met for this conversation at Columbia University's Lowe Library.

**MOYERS:** To the proverbial visitor from Mars, how would you describe what you do — your work as a literary critic?

**STEINER:** I would first of all try to warn him to go and see the great writers. If his trip were a short one, I'd say to him, "Please, don't waste too much time on critics." That would be the first advice. And then I'd try to take him to the natural history museum — in front of that marvelous aquarium they have here in New York, where there are tiny pilot fish, with rather queer eyes, in front of real fish — the big ones. And the good critic is the pilot fish. He's swimming ahead of the real thing, clearing the water a bit, also saying to people, "Look, there's something magnificent coming behind me — Joyce, or Proust, or Mann, or Kafka — pay attention, and I'll help you spot the thing when it comes." And this is a very exciting craft, but also a distinctly minor one.

**MOYERS:** Do the great works of literature require the critic?

**STEINER:** One would have to guess, that given enough time, they'd break through on their own. And there have been great works which have broken through every barrier of silence and prejudice. But life is short, and I think most masters have profited from finding pioneers, or outriders in front of them, to help clear the road. Remember the mass of what is published every day. We've never had *[such]* a situation. In new titles in England last year: 24,600. In this country, about 18,000. No one can keep up. I always think of a miracle in the early days on *The Nation* — *The New Republic*. Mr. Edmund Wilson, then a young man, used to go in and all the books of the week were dumped on a big table. And somehow, he had in the tips of his fingers antennae, and how he did it we don't know, but he'd grab out something called Hemingway, or something called William Faulkner, and he very rarely missed. And it's that kind of almost preternatural feel in the tip of your fingers which makes the great critic. And it's not at all perhaps the gift of a great writer.

**MOYERS:** He's something of a browser, isn't he, and what he picks to browse through becomes the agenda for a lot of other people?

**STEINER:** Because he often gets it right. Now, one can also get it wrong. My opinion is, no harm done, but the waste in the marketplace of the work of quality possibly being crowded out by the junk, means that the garbage collecting task of the critic can really be a very creative one. He says to you, Please, don't lose your time on this when there is the real quality on the next table.

**MOYERS:** T.S. Eliot thought that great poetry, great art, can communicate before it is understood. Do you agree with that?

**STEINER:** Yes, to a very small circle. He's unquestionably right, and we all go through this. And we pick up something and it stuns us, we don't quite know why. It can happen with a great abstract painting, with a difficult piece of music. We walk around a modern sculpture, and something in our stomach actually turns with it. It's a fascinating physical sensation, and the English poet A.E. Housman said, "When you shave, suddenly the razor gets stuck when you think of certain lines." And that's not understanding — it is something deeper. But for the general — the general literate reader who may not have the exposure to that experience, a good critic will be a real help.

**MOYERS:** Is there a danger of what Ben Jonson called "ingesting the object," of consuming the work of art in the commentary?

**STEINER:** Oh, a tremendous danger. We have since the Middle Ages these vast commentaries on small texts. And there — I saw something on television once which completely cleared it up for me, in those marvelous programs by Captain Cousteau many years ago, going down and down. He said there's a process we don't understand at about 300 meters down. His best divers were taking off their mask, yelling with joy. The last thing one would hear from them, saying "I can breathe." He called this the "dizziness of the depths." That when you go deep enough into a work, a kind of self-destructive dizziness takes over. It's a spiral without end. Commentary on commentary as in a series of mirrors, and this of course will also destroy the work of art, and I think one has to watch very carefully just what one is up to.

**MOYERS:** What advice would you give to an aspiring young critic to avoid the "dizziness of the depths"?

**STEINER:** First of all, he's got to bear his reader in mind. If the commentary becomes too massive and too arrogant, as so much modern criticism is, he's going to let the reader get away with it without reading the work. This is extremely dangerous. In fact all of us now are reading reviews rather than books, myself included.

**MOYERS:** And there are even biographies of critics coming out. What do you think about that?

**STEINER:** Yes. There was a French critic, great French critic Sandburg, and who died howling with despair, "Never will there be a statue built to critics." He's probably wrong. I mean we may even see that go up on public squares. Look, it's the wrong end of the stick. There's a very simple thing you do when you get up in the morning — and I always say that to my students — first thing, you say, "I'm going to try and say something sensible about Milton, or Keats, or Hemingway, or Shakespeare, I don't think they're going to say anything about me today." And if you say that to yourself in the morning, you're going to get the day more or less right.

**MOYERS:** What is there in literature that has been worth the great investment of your life in it?

**STEINER:** Oh, unquestionably, something which one can't paraphrase, and which is very dangerous. That the page in front of you, or the poem you learn by heart, or the play you've seen, comes to possess you more than any other order of experience; That living things seem unreal compared to the intensity of the imaginative experience. I think that's the most exciting thing that can happen. Why do I say it's dangerous? Because like many other people too addicted to literature, I've often noticed in myself the cry in the street seems mysteriously less powerful, less important, than the cry in the book, in the story. That the tears that come over the great tragic scene have a bitter despair which after all should be elicited by what is happening in the city around us. So there is a danger; an imagination too utterly absorbed and fascinated by great art and literature can become autistic, and whirl within its own very closed world. On the other hand, great art is probably our one constant, constant window on something much larger than ourselves.

**MOYERS:** When did you first discover literature?

**STEINER:** I was very lucky. I was born and brought up in Paris, and you went through streets called after great writers. Now that's not a trivial point. It isn't called 116th Street and Broadway. You went through rue Victor Hugo, Place LaFontaine, Square Moliere — everything was named after the great masters. And when you came to these grim military barrack lycees, teachers were able to tell even very young people, Remember, these are the lions. These are the immortals. And if you are fantastically lucky, we'll teach you how to read them well, and maybe one in a million of you will one day write a major work himself. The pact, the contract with immortality is central to that culture — it's a very antidemocratic pact, it's an elitist pact — but you're lucky if you're built that way.

**MOYERS:** Isn't it interesting what place and identifications like, that can do to a young life. I grew up in a small town in east Texas where you went down Houston Street, Austin Street, Bowie Street — all Texas heroes. So my whole perception was shaped by the streets I walked down. It's interesting that that happens in literature as well.

**STEINER:** Completely. But how lucky we both are not to have grown up on Elm, Pine, and 57th! Nothing like that can then happen.

**MOYERS:** Is it true that as a child you were puzzling over the identity of Homer and Christ and Shakespeare?

**STEINER:** Oh, tremendously, in a completely childish way. I was told that these people were decisive, and that nobody had ever been like them, and that their words would last thousands and thousands of years, and you had to learn them by heart. And every time I asked about them in the most childish way, I was told honestly that we knew next to nothing about them. In fact, in the case of Homer and Christ there were very learned people saying they never existed. These are just words to conceal quite different kinds of authorship. I was immensely intrigued and baffled by this.

**MOYERS:** Were these teachers telling you this, or parents, or—?

**STEINER:** Parents and teachers. Again, the French are quite skeptical about many things. After all, it's in 1859 that Renan writes his famous *Life of Jesus*, which begins our modern central doubts about the identity of the figure. No, it's a very Voltairean education, but also quite honestly, I think they were trying to teach me an important lesson: read the work, and don't worry so much about who the man was, which is a very healthy lesson. But I was awfully worried.

**MOYERS:** What is your own conclusion about Shakespeare, was there one Shakespeare, was there—

**STEINER:** I believe there was one Shakespeare. I believe he is the man of Stratford, but I refuse to dismiss one haunting problem which is this. We know through his will, we know through his very precise economic middle-class way of thinking about property, that he dies checking everything that belongs to him, and he does not mention sixteen major, gigantic plays not yet printed at his death in any form. Hence, if at all existing on the floor of the theater, somewhere in London, in rough papers and rough actors' parts. And that psychological riddle, that a man would make no reference to that; I have no answer for, and I find it haunting.

**MOYERS:** How was it, that as a young person, poetry became so seductive to you?

**STEINER:** I guess I was very lucky. I found out that I began picking it up by heart very quickly and very early.

**MOYERS:** How young?

**STEINER:** Oh, that's very young. Remember, much of what is called education in America I would consider as planned amnesia, meant to destroy all memory. And I come from an old-fashioned system where you drill memory, you learn by heart, you learn by heart. In fact dates, places, history, names — and I began seeing that when I loved the poem, it came in to me rather quickly. Like children who start piano lessons very early, and who say, "I pick it up through my fingers, in fact the score is entering into me." I must have been six or seven, when the first poems which I deeply loved began taking up house inside me. And poetry does seem to me one of the three or four things which puts us furthest from our black and rather ugly biological selves, and which is a mystery of our transcendent nature, possibly. Why it works, we don't know, how it works, we don't really know. The greatest poets hesitate to look into their own workshop too deeply, and for all the massive studies of modern psychology, we don't really know very much about it. And the sense of that mystery possessed me early.

**MOYERS:** That does confirm Eliot's observation, it seems to me, that some poetry, at least, communicates before it's understood, because surely a child cannot understand what is being communicated with it as such, at such a tender age.

**STEINER:** Unless he's translating it into his own terms. And could one of the secrets of very great art be, that we all keep translating to our level; Right through our lives. The person you and I are today is not reading a great nursery rhyme in the way we then did, and when we are very old, we may read it again differently. And some of the most haunting poetry is minor poetry — Walter de la Mare, a neglected poet — and it sings to us as a child, it sings to us in adolescence quite differently, when it seems to awake physical responses. Isn't part of the magic of the great artist to say, "I can also speak to you, don't worry about it. I am reaching you, though not necessarily at all at the same level in which I am reaching someone else."

**MOYERS:** And that's why the nursery rhyme becomes a fairytale, which becomes a myth, which becomes a religious phenomenon.

**STEINER:** Or a great novel, into which it can grow later on.

**MOYERS:** You mentioned translating. I know that as a child, you were speaking English and French and German, and reading in those languages as well. How does the mind — have you thought about how the mind translates from one language to the other?

**STEINER:** I spent many years worrying about this, and we have almost nothing to go on, except in one fascinating field in which Soviet medicine has done the great work through war wounds. In cases, where parts of the brain or skull were damaged or shot away or stunned by war wounds, some fascinating discoveries have been made about the way different languages are forgotten or recovered or used. In certain cases — and you'd expect this by common sense — the language the patient had learned most recently vanished first, which suggests almost a sandwich layering, with the one of his childhood somehow deeper, stuck in there and lasting. Not always. In other cases, we have very disturbing cases, confusion. People begin speaking a mixed lingo of the languages they knew. This would suggest that the wirings are getting crossed. Now, is it a computer? If it is a computer, how fantastically more powerful is it than anything we can conceive. One very fascinating experience each and every one of us has every day, is this thing called "I'm looking for a word, it's on the tip of my tongue." And, my God, is that physical! It is on the tip, and your fingers are reaching. That suggests to me some kind of spatial storage, but we don't know. We don't know. But it does suggest something is looking on a shelf for the right place.

**MOYERS:** Yet you never had to learn the process of translation, as a child, speaking English, French, and German. It happened. You didn't have to plug in, unplug, turn on, turn off?

**STEINER:** Never, because I came from a natural multilingual culture, such as, for instance, in Holland, in Switzerland. Those people who live around the great common Swiss—Swedish-Finnish border always have both of these, tremendously difficult, different languages. If it's natural from birth, it's internal. It is somehow put inside you. And it's the old marvelous fable of the millipede. You ask him how does he walk, and the poor beast stops, totally paralyzed, because to think through the solution of his thousand feet he's never done. It's when he gets on with it that it works.

**MOYERS:** Or, to think about tying your tie makes the feat itself impossible. And that's a vulgarization of the point, but—

**STEINER:** But a very good one, because it's an excellent example because it looks as if there's a memory in your hands, as if some of the hands have memorized very complicated processes, and are much quicker than any reflection on them could be.

**MOYERS:** In what language do you dream?

**STEINER:** My own experience is that if you've spent a day in one of the languages, native or immediate to yourself, that's what you're going to dream in. And that's very, very odd when you travel, because I'm beginning to develop a theory that there's an airport language. As we start commuting around this little earth, there's a kind of terrible fruit salad of languages, and sometimes when I'm traveling too much, suddenly in my inner ear it's— that mixture, that marvelous mixture of Dutch and Japanese which you get at Frankfurt Airport in the morning when the businessmen arrive. But as a rule, if you've been speaking with someone and very intensely, and been hearing a language around you all day, you'll dream in that one.

**MOYERS:** What happens if you are, say, reading a French novel while you're in America talking to people like me? Do you dream in American, or English, or—

**STEINER:** Yes, or you dream in French with an American accent.

**MOYERS:** *[laughs]* Now I think you're teasing. You know your critics say that no man could possibly read everything you've read.

**STEINER:** Oh, I divide the world into two groups — the small world which matters. There are those who've read everything, and that's quite a large and vulgar group, and there are those who have reread it, and that's the one I'd like to belong to. And of course the trouble with my critics is probably they sleep at night. Now once you take the habit of sleeping at night, you're going to read less and less. It's a very worrisome thought.

**MOYERS:** Do you not sleep?

**STEINER:** Too much. But I hope that with advancing and grim old age, I shall sleep less. And I look forward to reading more.

**MOYERS:** Don't you suffer sometimes from idea fatigue? When you take ideas here and connect them here, you plumb here, explore there, doesn't sometimes your brain overload, as the cliché goes?

**STEINER:** That again is a very suggestive question, because you've got a computer model somewhere in back of that question. And we do know of overloadings if this thing is built that way. You know, my definition of a great university is a terribly simple one: that the students should come within smelling distance of those cancerous, passionate, possessed beings who eat ideas, who live thought. And once you've caught the smell of that, even if you can't do it yourself, even if you reject it and say, "I want something quite different out of life," you'll never again be uneducated. And I think that's the tremendous excitement of somewhere coming in reach of them as they walk across the campus, or down a library step, or down a corridor. And then you'll know the real thing, as you do when you've seen a great athlete. When you see a really great athlete walking across a room, he is not wasting motion, and suddenly you know that your self is spilling over in all sorts of useless ways, even as you sit down or get up — that's a tremendous lesson. Or watching a great dancer — to watch a great dancer tie her shoes. Degas talks about that.

Degas says, "if you want to know what great art is, please, watch a dancer putting on her slipper." There is no single waste, and that I think, again, is a wonderful lesson.

**MOYERS:** One can watch the athlete, and watch the dancer, but how do you watch someone think?

**STEINER:** I think, you know, it is almost physical. Certain great artists — you watch the doodle. We have fascinating films of Picasso doodling, totally unselfconsciously. And the speed of conception is beyond what the camera can grasp. And once they gave him, I don't even know the name of the instrument — beautiful thing, it's got a light at the end, it's like a pen that works with light, you may have seen that sequence, one can see that at the Museum of Modern Art. And what he is doing, is that he has carried inside him a space already alive with meaningful motion. And you're just figuring it out as it comes out on the glass plate. And he, that devil of a man, used to smile grimly and say, "Other people search, I only find."

**MOYERS:** What do you think informed that space in him? Where did the motion come from — or even the idea of that motion?

**STEINER:** I wonder whether it's an idea, or whether it is something quite magnificently and unfairly there already. Whether that kind of power reads itself in a way you and I cannot do. That in fact he's listening to something inside him. Already Plato, watching what may have been drug-taking reciters and poets — sacred mushrooms, because that's very important in ancient culture — well, Plato has this tremendous guess that certain supreme artists are totally empty, they're like a great glass of wine, the thing is being poured into them. And whereas you and I have to hook up with the outside, painfully looking for something, it spills through them. And he speaks of them as possessed dancers, and that's a tremendous image. Perhaps he had seen something like a whirling dervish. Something that is in the possession of a tremendous vertigo of creation, and is almost a neutral object through which great forces pour. And one can't fake that. It cannot be faked. We don't know how it happens.

**MOYERS:** "To thine own self be true."

**STEINER:** "To thine own self be true," — yes, in most cases that's pretty small beer.

**MOYERS:** Yes, that's the problem. You once said that poets need not know many books, but that they must know well those they do know. Which are the books you know well?

**STEINER:** This will strike you as terribly old-fashioned, but I think in the English language tradition, to stick to that for a moment, the Authorized Version of the Bible, the *Book of Common Prayer*, Shakespeare, are the constant inner echo chamber of reference. That is to say, we bounce our own sounds, like radar, off against those walls to place our own selves and our own use of language. Those are in a sense canonic moments of our training, they're the dictionary of reference inside us. There are then, each one of us carries, I think, a selection of poems, not all of which need be very great ones, or major. They've hooked into us at some mysterious point in our own lives, and this is how we find our home in the dark of our being. We find our way home, they light our steps home. Perhaps certain scenes in plays. To carry a complete novel is almost impossible, within one. It will be moments from great fiction. But the marvel of the thing is, you begin building a mosaic, a kind of mosaic of the indispensable, of that which you cannot do without.

**MOYERS:** Do you ever have the experience I have of remembering the impression that a poem created on you, but not the words per se? I know you memorize poems, and you know much more poetry by heart than I do, but sometimes—

**STEINER:** Well, you're absolutely right. Even a smell, a memory of where you came across it, and you say, "Why that smell, why that color?" And then you know it was in a room, or with a certain human being. I think human encounters can be like poems in that sense. Suddenly there was something that jelled in your memory, and it is associated with the voice of someone who read it to you for the first time. And I— I do desperately want to get a plug in, God help the culture, i.e., here, where people don't read out loud any more to their children, where people have not heard from earliest childhood major texts read to them by living voices, their mother or their father or an older brother or sister or closest friend. Because that which you have not heard will not sing for you later. And great literature, God help us, was not made only for silent pages. It speaks. It was made to speak and to sing. And reading out loud, speaking out loud, learning by heart, imprints quite literally on our consciousness, the codes of recognition.

**MOYERS:** And what happens to society where these codes of recognition are never deciphered?

**STEINER:** I think it's like a ship without ballast. One of the immense strengths of Russian culture is the oral transmission of great poetry and literature. Under censorship, under brutal police suppression, in a place which burns books, there's one way to keep them going. You speak them. You learn them by heart. You pass them on from person to person. That can never be crushed. There was a brilliant science fiction film, *Fahrenheit 451*, which showed what would happen once the book burners, tried to root out human memory. It's a very frightening, indeed, thing. But other things can censor—the stimuli of mass media, which stop quiet reading. The constant pressure of a certain kind of speed of daily life in our great cities, which blocks out the moments of calm. And, I think we've got to be very, very careful—many of us are losing the habit of being at home with ourselves.

**MOYERS:** Are you saying that there is some literature which, if we do not remember and hold in common, we lose something irretrievable?

**STEINER:** Absolutely, as there is certain music, as there are certain songs or we become what the great 17th century philosopher Leiden has called "monads"—dreadful little hard eggs with no windows, clashing against each other in atomic isolation. What makes a living community is the shared remembrance of its language and culture. Moreover, the language itself will of course get hollow, and very cheap, when it doesn't have in it the maximum pressure of living presence, which is great literature.

**MOYERS:** So it matters if you can remember Old Testament legends, and if you have a resonance for Homer. It matters to a society—

**STEINER:** Desperately. It's a political act. It means nobody—it means nobody can ever make a zombie of you. There will be part of you hooked into a great tradition of strength and remembrance. It's one of our last defenses against the political inhumanities of our time.

**MOYERS:** This is what you meant, I gather, when you talked about the organized amnesia of the past, that is—

**STEINER:** That's right.

**MOYERS:** We blank it all out.

**STEINER:** We blank it all out in the way in which Stalinism, for instance, decided overnight to rewrite history, and says this didn't exist. This never happened. This person is, as George Orwell said in his marvelous word, an "unperson." The attempt to pour the detergent of forgetting over human minds and spirits, can't be done, can't be done if you carry something inside you.

**MOYERS:** You keep relating it to political action, to the political consequence of it. But what about the consequence for simply the esthetics of living? What happens to people who do not remember the past?

**STEINER:** You know, esthetics of living, which is a very challenging phrase, I would want to link to politics. I've never seen how you keep the two apart. One of the frightening things is the impulse of the young at the moment, wherever one teaches and goes, to shut the door. To say, all right, esthetics of living, lifestyle, quality of life, but not out there, not on the marketplace. What you could call privatism, the obsession with privatism, which includes art, with doing your own thing, your own scene with a few friends, a few beloved, within a closed surface. I entirely see the tremendous temptation of that, but I always want to remember the Greek definition of the word "idiot," the technical definition. And it goes like this: a man who shuts his door, and does not go into the marketplace. And that is what they meant by an idiot. Because once we do that, we yield the marketplace to the hoodlums.

**MOYERS:** I think this is what concerns so many people now in America, that we're retreating into this kind of privatism at the expense of, well, the old cliché is the public good. I think it's the idea of the commonwealth. The idea of the commonwealth in this country is besieged at the moment, partly by communications which makes us all individual consumers of news and information, partly by politics, and partly by an inattention to the esthetics of living, which relates each of us to the larger world.

**STEINER:** And we can tie it directly to matters of verbal style. This country had a tremendous tradition of public speech—

**MOYERS:** Oh, yes.

**STEINER:** Of great oratory, of noble rhetoric of every kind. This has passed into grim suspicion. Sometimes I have the feeling here that someone who speaks well, who loves the language, who is articulate, who hears the music of English as it has rung out in its politics and history, is almost automatically regarded with suspicion. Aren't we in trouble when a culture begins thinking that because a man mumbles he is honest?

**MOYERS:** What happens to the imagination as we erode the ability to read?

**STEINER:** Well, that I think we unfortunately see in all of us. We get lazier, we lose the muscles of attention. And I do mean muscle. It looks as if the powers of concentration, the powers of going deep into a thing, are almost physical, and that like an athlete, when he doesn't practice, first they start aching like the devil, then they go flabby, and finally it's an agonizing process retraining them. There seems to be an almost physiological side to serious uses of the mind. Let it go, stuff yourself with tranquilizers, and the muscle won't work.

**MOYERS:** So physically as with the muscle, so intellectually with the mind.

**STEINER:** Undoubtedly. There is no wall between those two. The more we learn about the neurophysiology of perception and cognition, the more we find it difficult to separate what we used to call in a very awkward, pre-Copernican vocabulary, body and mind. Let me give you just one fascinating example. When you are very tired, very, very tired, at the end of a long work, just before real exhaustion sets in, there is a curious twilight zone, in which for instance suddenly it becomes marvelously easy to learn by heart, or to understand certain difficult relations, equations, or words. It's as if there had been a clearing of the room, as if all the excess furniture had been for a moment shoved out, and there was a wonderful receptivity, a kind of open, plastic, vulnerable openness to what you are taking in. That's a very suggestive phenomenon, and it does imply constantly that what we call mental and physical, nervous and intellectual, passionate and reflective, are woven together in a web infinitely more sophisticated than anything we can describe.

**MOYERS:** Do you think there is a language crisis in the West?

**STEINER:** Again, that's a huge question. France, for example, is battling for its identity, having lost its role as a world language. France has pitched tremendous and perhaps misguided political and public energies into trying to keep English and American at bay, reasserting its national being in history by a certain kind of purism and chauvinism. All over the world, since 1945, people are killing each other over language questions. The Flemings and the Walloons, the Basques and the Spaniards; we have ferocious language hatreds and quarrels in the British Isles — Gaelic, Welsh, against the English English of the dominant ruling central class; the language hatreds in Canada are notorious. My guess is this: in a period in which so much of reality seems to be flying about at speeds never realized before, in which one man, Winston Churchill, started his career by riding on a horse with a saber at the Battle of Omdurman in the Sudan, in a way in which Homer would have fully understood, and ended it by inspecting the hydrogen bomb in his last prime ministership, in a period of unbelievable acceleration and disorder of every sensation and fact, people are unconsciously almost, clinging to their languages, to the past, to their languages like the anchor of their identifiable being. And in that sense, we've both have a crisis of a world commercial detergent English-American, American-English spreading over the earth like soapsuds and trying to wash away human differences and details. And on the other hand, a formidable resistance in which people often quite blindly and savagely are willing to go to almost any murderous lengths to stick to, to revive, even to keep going artificially, their own national tongue.

**MOYERS:** What is language to you? To me, it's an adventure, an effort to try to put something new or personal into the world, to try to, well, change reality, not by confronting it or addressing it, but by trying to infiltrate it with a phrase, an idea, or some image that might illuminate your own journey, if not the destination. Does that make any sense to you?

**STEINER:** Enormous sense. I think the way we jumped out of the animal kingdom to being men was when two things happened in language. Somebody came along and said, "Where is the water hole." And instead of pointing to where the water hole was, the person he asked, perhaps his enemy, perhaps a practical joker, said, "It's a couple of hundred yards over there." And [he] lied. The first lie is the beginning of humanity. That is to say, the almost unfathomable power to say that which is not, to say otherwise, to say "no" to the world, to restructure for one's purposes. Animals have camouflage. So far as we know they cannot lie. They cannot counterstate the world. That's

the first miracle. The second one was, the first time a human being spoke about the Monday afternoon after his own funeral, and made the discovery that the future tense can go any distance. I don't take that for granted. That astrophysics can talk of certain collisions of the galaxy billions of years from now. That we have ways to speak of infinite time beyond our own life, means that the future tenses are the doors on hope, on dreams, on the forward dreaming which is human history. And if we didn't have these future tenses, if our sense of language stopped with our sense of biological being, I'm not sure we would have made it, I'm not sure we would really have wanted to be men.

**MOYERS:** So language is the power to resist the world as it is.

**STEINER:** To resist it, to say 'no,' which is a quite fierce thing, but also to hope. Hope is a kind of future tense, often without any anchorage in substantial reality. And again, so far as we know, animals can look for forage, they can certainly store for the winter, it doesn't look like that miraculous gamble on futurity which we call hope. That again seems to be radically linguistic in humans.

**MOYERS:** So language, art, literature — all have been civilizing influences on our journey.

**STEINER:** They have been the drugs of dreams, without which I think in the face of the scandalous fact that all of us have to die — and again, I find that a profoundly scandalous fact, in the face of this lousy, rotten scandal that not one of us will get away with it — in the face of this, we have simply refused to lie down. And we have constructed these great anti-worlds, these worlds of antimatter, which are art and literature.

**MOYERS:** Well of this brings me to a confession. I have wanted to talk to you for ten years now, ever since I read *In Bluebeard's Castle*. I have wanted to talk with you because it was obvious to me in that book and in much of what I have read of you since, that you are wrestling, have wrestled, will continue to wrestle, with the single question of our time, in my judgment, at least the question that has tormented my own journey, and it's this: If art, philosophy, literature, language, are humanizing and civilizing, how do you explain the springing up at the core of European civilization of the crime of the century — of the bestial, political crimes of the totalitarian state?

**STEINER:** If I could answer that, I would be at peace, and stop working and writing, probably.

**MOYERS:** You're not at peace.

**STEINER:** I'm not at peace at all.

**MOYERS:** Because of that.

**STEINER:** Because of that. The great Jeffersonian hope — others have hoped it, but in Jefferson it has a kind of crystalline power and dignity — was, as we learn more, as our imagination becomes more educated, certain kinds of bestiality won't be possible to us any more. We based on this hope, and one sees it in our 19th century schools, universities, but also in the modern hope of education — one sees it in a figure such as Lincoln, supremely, in Matthew Arnold, in others — that the school, the library, are the great instruments of making man compassionate and humane, and giving to him the realization that any other human being is an infinitely complicated and valuable presence.

**MOYERS:** It's a great liberal hope.

**STEINER:** The great liberal hope. And out of a culture charged as perhaps no other was — Germany, Central Europe, with the cult of high education, of art — out of the world of the symphony concert, the university seminar, the museum, the gallery, comes the terror, the ultimate terror and the bestiality of totalitarianism. And this goes on today, of course. Many people say this is an absolutely silly question, because the one thing doesn't connect with the other, and I know that's totally dishonest. Because if I am allowed to say that a great novel or a great poem has done me good, I must be allowed to ask, can it do me evil? I simply can't cheat. I can't have it both ways. If a thing is important enough to change me, I've got to ask how does it do it. Beginning of our conversation, it seemed to me that one could suggest that whether a thing becomes too abstract, too concentratedly intellectual, too mental without involving the responsibility of the whole personality, it could begin to boomerang — that is to say, we weep, oh buckets, as did many Nazis, over the death in the novel, over the wonderful sad passage in the symphony, over some terrible scene in a play. We go out into the street, and the human beings out there mean nothing to us. They have

become empty fictions and we treat them accordingly. I'm very, very tempted to do more thinking along the lines of a overdevelopment, a kind of cancer of the imagination, of abstraction, of intellectuality for its own sake. Something can go very, very wrong in the processes of training our sensibility. That's only the beginning of an answer. There may be something else: there is something that really scares me in the West. The scientist, even the most modest young graduate student, can say, well, I can now do things Newton couldn't. I can even do things Einstein couldn't. And next week, there are going to be some fantastic new things. He is moving with the arrow of time. In art and literature in the West, this is not clear. The statement, there shall never again be as great a writer as Shakespeare, the statement, no one will write music again like Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, the statement, Michaelangelo and Leonardo are plastic and graphic artists whom we shall never equal again. Unprovable. The grammar should start screaming and hit you on the head and say, stop saying things like that. Because what are you saying? What are you doing when you say it? And yet it is just possible. There is the haunting possibility that we come after the great moments in art and literature, that we come in every sense a long way after, that we are the epilogue to Western genius. And if there is anything in this idea, and I'm very, very hesitant, I'm trying to live it in me, then there could be a terrible hatred against culture, right from within our cultural establishment. Then some of the savagery of those within the Soviet Union, in Nazi Germany, today in Argentina, where the life of that greatest perhaps of living writers, Borges, is in constant danger, those people are saying, I can't bear that load anymore, I'll do anything to smash, to throw off my shoulders and back this enormity of pressure and glory which isn't mine, which I don't just want to transmit. In Goering's animal outcry, "When I hear the word culture, I reach for my pistol," there is something which, however chilling and obscene, has an odd pathos in it too.

**MOYERS:** Well, Hitler— what was it Hitler said of the Jews, that they invented the conscience of mankind, this idea of a monotheistic god who arose at Mount Sinai, preached by the prophets, permeated the parables of Jesus, presented such an ideal that a culture simply could not tolerate coexisting with that ideal, and had to try to eliminate it forever.

**STEINER:** It almost breaks our back. The load of hope, of dreams, which the great Western legacy, Judaic and Greek, has put upon us. Whom do we hate most? We hate most those who ask of us more than we want to give, who suggest to us that we are far from stretching to the full height of our own ethical possibility.

**MOYERS:** "My God is a jealous God."

**STEINER:** "My God is a jealous God unto the thirtieth generation." What we cannot forgive is the blackmail of the ideal, in culture, in morality, and there may have been a kind of enormous spasmodic animal turning on that ideal. And I envy no one more than the scientist in the sense that for him, the past really is the past. He bears it affection, he bears it respect, it is in no way in his way, on the contrary he is on the escalator. And we have to rethink fundamentally the difference in our Western culture of the two calendars — the calendar of the arts and the calendar of the sciences. The calendar of the sciences is full of hope and tolerance; the calendar of the arts has a lot of darkness in it.

**MOYERS:** Somehow that rings authentic to me, and still I cannot reconcile the dreams that I had often after my first visit as a very young man to war-torn Europe in the early '50s when the debris was still evident. The dreams I had upon coming back of a Nazi commandant who had presided throughout the day and the week over the extermination of tens of thousands of human beings and on Sunday strolled through the museum, listening to Beethoven. I still can't understand that.

**STEINER:** I can't begin to, and it's worse than not understanding it, the cheap answer, he didn't listen well, I will not allow.

**MOYERS:** No.

**STEINER:** That's just a cheap way out. He may have listened excellently, indeed some of them played music very beautifully. And there I come up against a wall which I am ramming my head against when I teach, when I write, I'm now even trying to come back to it via fiction, yet another way, because it is to me the constant crying question, and if we cannot arrive at some better understanding of it, exactly what are we ourselves doing as individuals who want to serve literacy?

**MOYERS:** Fiction? What are you doing in fiction?

**STEINER:** I am publishing very shortly in England a pretty black little novel, where I imagine a very old Hitler, in his 90s, he is found at last by a party of hunters somewhere in Amazonia. And the problem is that he doesn't remember who he is, he is so very old, it's so long ago. And it is when he first hears some music over a broken transistor on the march out, on the forced march out, that Hitler wakes in Hitler. And it is the first time he begins speaking again, and that the power of the voice returns to him — that terrible, terrible power of the voice. It is again a book about language, that I hope about much else, it speculates on the possibility that he hated in the Jew above all else his great rivals in the mastery of the word. That the commitment of Jewish culture to the mastery of speech, for Judaism has always had its homeland in speech, was the thing he, that other black magician of language, could not tolerate. There is a possibility that in some ways he thought he had Jewish blood, we know that, that in some ways he imagined or fantasized on this dread possibility within himself. And so I tried to show in this novel, the struggle for the mastery of the word between him and his almost crazed captors. And the struggle for the past, for who will have that mysterious power which is to remember, which is to remember in the form of speech. And that's just perhaps one more chapter in what is that same book, that same essay I keep writing over and over, which is not only to ask how could it happen, but what worries me much, much, much more, could it happen again, and how would we behave if it did?

**MOYERS:** What do you think would have happened if after Munich, Hitler had said to the world, "Leave me alone and I'll leave you alone. I'm stopping at my borders, I'm staying in my borders, I'll leave you alone if you'll leave me alone." And then went systematically about the business of eliminating the Jews. What do you think culture, Western culture, would have done?

**STEINER:** It'd be the most prosperous nation, probably, on earth. The winter sports hotels which are a few miles from Dachau would be crowded with international guests. Absolutely nothing would have been done to save the people inside. But let's not take refuge in remote hypothetical questions. The businessmen, all the Western businessmen, who are right now doing big business in Argentina, are one or two blocks from just about the worst torture prisons and camps of which we have record since Hitler and Stalin. Oh, the thing is right around us. We travel to, we do business with, there was hardly a drop in world tourism during the period of the Colonels' rule in Greece. Islands three miles apart, the concentration camp islands and next to them the crowded tourist beaches.

**MOYERS:** What does it say to you, George Steiner, that culture couldn't resist this bestiality when it arrived after a century of liberalism? What does it say to you that even now, you suggest, in a highly cultured and civilized society, forms of this bestiality are arising again? What does it say to you about the imperative of teaching, writing, trying to come to grips with literacy?

**STEINER:** It says to me that I cannot think collectively. I can think of individuals. I keep meeting people out of those hells, people who have left the Gulag, people who have survived, and who have a dignity and a serenity and a luminousness of hope far beyond mine, because they were carrying some kind of luggage inside them which remained undamaged. And it is when I meet people like that or study their work that I again am pretty confident that we have to keep trying. But that's what I meant by the future tense. It's a bet on humanity. We have no idea whether we will win it, but suppose you refuse to make the bet. What then?

**MOYERS:** And the answer?

**STEINER:** Well, then, one couldn't go on. Then one couldn't go on. In that case you would get yourself into the nihilistic situations of total despair, which seem to me the only clue to some of the terrorist gangs now at work, particularly in Western countries, who will rather die, who will rather wipe themselves out than negotiate in any form with the society in which they have given up all hope. And there where there is no hope, there can be no negotiation.

**MOYERS:** Do you remember that speech that Nietzsche's madman gave, what was it he said? "We have killed God. You and I have killed God." Do you think that when Hitler set out to destroy the Jews, he thought he was killing God?

**STEINER:** I think he wanted to destroy those who kept reinventing him. Whether God is or is not is far beyond our ken and an intensely private matter of our most private instincts and apprehensions. But a people who goes around constantly inviting him into the front parlor, is something which I think not only Hitler, but others too, found almost

unbearable.

**MOYERS:** European culture, in fact, could have well have found this ideal as held in monotheism in even the utopian socialism of Marx and the other prophets of the International who were Jewish, that he thought once and for all I will rid the world and history and my ambitions of that claim to utopianism. If you kill the Jew and God and the idea of Utopia, you leave nothing between the state and total domination.

**STEINER:** Or, you leave nothing between individual man and the maximum satisfaction of his physical and material needs. It is a ghastly thing to wake up in the morning and have God's voice saying to you, "Be better than you are." Or have Christ say to you, "Turn the other cheek when you are slapped." Or have Karl Marx say to you, "Give away everything you can spare, until there be absolute economic equality and justice around you." To hear that coming in through your window every morning is a pretty maddening business. And with a demonic instinct, demonic instinct, which I think perhaps only art can ever hope to understand, Hitler put his finger on the nerve of fed-upness, of profound subconscious resentment in a generally secular civilization.

**MOYERS:** We always, don't we, kill those who hold out a goal? The visionary promise, those who preach justice, whether it's Martin Luther King, or anyone like that. There is something in this culture which bears tradition of a liberal tradition, bears the this mark of a liberal tradition, that for all of its own salute, doesn't want the ideal to be around.

**STEINER:** All the more reason, in that case, for that ever-optimistic fool who is a teacher to try to produce the next Martin Luther King, or when he meets him, to serve him, to hand on his work, to be of some small use as a mailman for the ideal.

**MOYERS:** Thank you very much. From New York, this has been a conversation with George Steiner. I'm Bill Moyers.

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