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LIVING LITERACIES TEXT OF THE
NOVEMBER 14-16, 2002 CONFERENCE AT YORK UNIVERSITY



Grammars of Creation

by George Steiner
with an introduction by Maurice Elliott

Taken from:

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PART FOUR: IMAGES

Introduction to George Steiner

By Maurice Elliott

Presenting Professor George Steiner is difficult, if only because his learning and eloquence are legendary. I feel that it should be done in at least three languages, and probably in a verse form appropriate for someone who shares a birthday with Shakespeare. Fortunately, Professor Steiner's courtesy and grace are also legendary. Did he not once say, "I think we must all learn to be guests of each other." Therefore I may be forgiven a salutation stolen from Chekhov, who has a schoolmaster in one of his stories addressed as "Your Scholarship." Educated in Paris, and at Harvard, Chicago, and Oxford, Professor Steiner is "Extraordinary Fellow" (how apt!) of Churchill College, Cambridge, Professor Emeritus of the University of Geneva, and the first Lord Weidenfeld Professor of Comparative Literature at Oxford.

I hesitate to call Professor Steiner a literary critic, not least on account of Rilke's advice to a young poet: "Read as little as possible of literary criticism – such things are either partisan games, which have become petrified and meaningless, hardened and empty of life, or else they are just clever word games, in which one view wins today, and tomorrow the opposite view. Works of art are of an infinite solitude, and no means of approach is so useless as criticism." Perhaps his first two books, *Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky* (1958), and *The Death of Tragedy* (1960), are literary criticism – arising out of a debt of love, he might argue – but the major portion of his work of over twenty volumes, including prize-winning fiction, and in addition to his two hundred or more appearances as a reviewer in *The New Yorker*, has concerned two inextricably related topics, and in many ways forms an arabesque on a double-braided theme: the mysterious problem of evil, particularly in relation to the Shoah and like events; and the crisis in language and humane culture, the relation between aesthetics and the barbaric. Central to his thought, he has said, "is my astonishment, naïve as it seems to people, that you can use human speech both to love, to build, to forgive, and also to torture, to hate, to destroy and to annihilate." It has been a complaint of his critics, that Professor Steiner repeats himself. Well, there is a short riposte: "He needs to!" It is clear that he has a custodial and ever-vigilant eye – for example, on outbursts of racism and neo-Nazism. "Lest we forget" might also be said of Kristallnacht, November 1933; and in 1994 Professor Steiner wrote that of the Jewish boys and girls in his school class or circle, only two, including himself, had survived. It is clear from each of his works that his theme is unending and that his passionate commitment to understanding spurs him to apocalyptic eloquence and provocative expression, qualities that do not suit all tastes. In a fine tribute to Hermann Broch, Elias Canetti (as always, alert to the conscience of words) gives a version of the artist as one who shares the tortured gravel of everyday life with the "dog-like vice" of "sticking his damp nose into every thing." For Broch, says Canetti, this vice takes the form of breathing – "he has a memory for breath," which amounts to an intelligent and refined study of the relationships between people.

As it is not possible for me to summarize in five minutes the whole body of George Steiner's work without travesty, or at least with greater aphoristic skills than I possess, I should like therefore (as Frederick Maurice said of Coleridge) to put you in "a way of reading" by offering a maniple of brief points.

First: that the breadth and scope of this Living Literacies conference in which you have participated realizes Professor Steiner's armed vision that "specialization has reached

moronic vehemence. Learned lives are expended on reiterative minutiae." Write that in your commonplace books!

Second: if you are starting out to explore his works, perhaps you may begin with "The Uncommon Reader" in the book of essays *No Passion Spent*. It is clear, careful and challenging – and to be challenged. Or treat yourselves to *Language and Silence*, a book that was appropriated by everyone and his partner in the '60s, one which passed into the general academic consciousness – often without acknowledgement

Third: just listen to these sentences!"

"Literary criticism should arise out of a debt of love." (1959)

"We are entering on large difficult ground. There are landmarks worth noting from the outset." (1961)

"When he looks back, the critic sees a eunuch's shadow. Who would be a critic if he could be a writer?" (1966)

"That it is untranslatable is one of the definitions offered of poetry. What remains after the attempt, intact and uncommunicated, is the original poem." (1966)

"It is not the literal past that rules us, save, possibly, in a biological sense. It is images of the past." (1971)

"Historians and sociologists agree, and after all we should sometimes believe them too, that there has been a marked decline in the role played by formal religious systems, by the churches, in western society." (1974)

"Act II of *Cymbeline* closes with a monologue by Posthumus." (1975)

"If there is currently a debate on 'culture' – as distinct from a merely formal academic-journalistic rhetoric or rhetorical gossip – it involves, it must, where it is honestly pursued, involve the nature of 'texts.'" (1978)

"The crisis of spirit suffered by Germany in 1918 was more profound than that of 1945." (1978)

"Chardin's *Le Philosophe Lisant* was completed on 4 December, 1734. It is thought to be a portrait of the painter Aved, a friend of Chardin's." (1978)

"Between c. 1790 and c.1905, it was widely held by European poets, philosophers, scholars, that Sophocles' *Antigone* was not only the finest of Greek tragedies, but a work of art nearer to perfection than any other produced by the human spirit." (1984)

"We still speak of 'sunrise' and 'sunset.' We do so as if the Copernican model of the solar system had not replaced, ineradicably, the Ptolemaic. Vacant metaphors, eroded figures of speech, inhabit our vocabulary and grammar. They are caught, tenaciously, in the scaffolding and recesses of our common parlance. There they rattle about like old rags or ghosts in the attic." (1989)

"Rain, especially for a child, carries distinct smells and colours." (1997)

"We have no more beginnings. *Incipit*: that proud Latin word which signals the start survives in our dusty 'inception.'" (2000)

These are the opening sentences of Professor Steiner's major works. I have cited them as a kind of collage, because in this density they demonstrate one of the major qualities of this "general reader." They are challenging and declarative, inviting and seductive, and, above all, clear. You might resist the persuasion, but you will not be assaulted. You will find a stringency not acceptable to all tastes, for, as he has said, he has never been able to disguise his faith in Spinoza's equation of excellence and difficulty. For powerful driving rhetorical force you may try the series of T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures titled *In Bluebeard's Castle*. Perhaps follow it with that extraordinary allegory of argument, Professor Steiner's powerful expression of evil as he gives A. H. the jungle podium in *The Portage to San Christobal of A. H.*

Fourth: may I offer a personal note. I haven't been on the campus here for five or six weeks, and it felt strange on Thursday morning to be parking in an unfamiliar place and to be watching the bustle of others – sweet was the breath of morn, as the poet says – and it did not feel quite right not to be in the classroom. When I registered for the conference, the young lady assistant knew me, although I had not recognized her, and she said that she had been in my class last year, and had thoroughly enjoyed it. Apart from the immediate vanity, expressed in a blush of pleasure, I was reminded of the long affair I have had with teaching and of how gracious the young can be. How polite they are in general, and how much, as Mr. John O'Leary told us so eloquently, they want to learn. If the unending task of teaching teaches one anything (in answer to an important question raised) it ought to teach humility. But we don't say much about our teachers, I fear. I have had some wonderful students, but I had two magnificent supervisors: Elaine Feinstein and Kathleen Coburn. I was very fortunate, I think. So you may imagine that I find admirable the magnanimity of Professor Steiner's views on his great teachers. Chapter nine of his memoir begins: "J'eu de la chance avec mes professeurs," and he goes on to praise Blackmur, Sirluck, Scholem, and others. We share Ernest Sirluck; but another important teacher whose acquaintance we shared was F. R. Leavis. It has always seemed to me that there is not only a justness in Professor Steiner's account of that austere and difficult man, but a conclusion that serves as a touchstone for his own passionate advocacy of teaching, indeed of literacy. He says that if there is some nagging doubt about Leavis's claims to be ranked among the great modern critics, "it is simply because criticism must be, by Leavis's own definition, both central and humane. In his achievement the centrality is manifest, the humanity has often been tragically absent."

Finally, such graciousness returns us to Professor Steiner's real presence here today. It has been generally conceded by reviewers that *Grammars of Creation* is a crowning achievement to a life of writing. In this book he seeks to give language its mouthful of air, to set it breathing creatively again in a way that can match the ethos and beliefs of our complex, anxious, information w/racked world; to find what Professor Powe on Thursday called the "the soul's route." How can we make imagining concrete? "I am haunted by the possibility," he says in his autobiographical memoir *Errata*, "that out of our mammalian midst, a Plato, a Gauss or a Mozart, justifies, redeems, the species which devised and carried out Auschwitz."

Professor Steiner, Your Scholarship, we are honoured and pleased to have you with us. Welcome to York University.

Grammars of Creation

by George Steiner

Many years ago, one evening in Massey College, I sat with Robertson Davies, Norrie Frye, Kathleen Coburn (the world's greatest Coleridge scholar), when there walked in a very much younger Marshall McLuhan. Astounded, and without thinking, I turned to Professor Frye, and said, "There's Marshall McLuhan." I cannot hope to reproduce the air of sardonic melancholy which immediately invaded Norrie's features. He had a long look, and said, "So the man alleges." This is to say what Toronto was at that moment – and perhaps will be again? – the absolute centre for the study of Letters and the Humanities, possibly in the world. I wonder whether it has struck our host, B. W. Powe, and those with us this today, that reading and writing are a brief, ephemeral form in human history. Millennia of orality precede and surround the written word and the arts of reading. Homer is immediately closer to Flaubert or Proust. Homer is twenty thousand years removed from the far origins of the mythological material he deals with. Endless communities on earth do not have what we consider to be literature. There is no community on earth known to anthropology that does not have music. I will come back to that, music being far more universal than language. There is also a second great code – mathematics – untranslatable and universal, which I will also come back to shortly.

The historical prestige, the authority (I am simply translating the Latin, "auctoritas") of reading and writing may well prove to have had a relatively brief run in the history of the species from, say, the early Proto-Chinese inscriptions and Sumerian clay tablets to the nascent age of the electronic – a blink of the eye in the biological and social history of man. The origins of classical literacy are highly specific. They are those of the priesthood, of power, or of what Max Weber called "an aristocracy of the intellect," or what we can also call a clerisy, les clercs. The capacity to write and read was in the hands of a gradually expanding elite. Remember that Socrates only twice consults a written text in the whole of that great classical corpus. There are only two moments when he asks for a scroll to be brought to verify a citation. Jesus probably did not know how to write. The pericope of the woman taken in adultery, in that mysterious passage in the Gospel according to John about tracing words in the dust and immediately effacing them, is, according to biblical scholarship, a much a later insertion. Neither Socrates nor Jesus published.

I've had the privilege recently of being a Harvard University professor, and there I learned one of the greatest of Harvard jokes. A group of rabbis are on the road to Golgotha and Jesus is coming by under the cross. The young rabbi bursts into tears and says, "Oh, God, the pity of it!" The old rabbi says, "What is the pity of it?" The young rabbi says, "Master, Master, what a teacher he was." "Didn't publish!" That cold tenure-joke at Harvard contains a deep truth. Indeed, Jesus and Socrates did not publish. Moreover, even during the golden age of what is called mass literacy – a brief age – the degree of actual capacity and usage remained exceedingly difficult to access. We now have the documents – they've only been studied fairly recently – of the examinations undergone by the conscripts in 1914 in France at the height of that Republic. In fact, over seventy percent of the conscripts from rural areas, and from less privileged urban areas also, could read only a few words, if at all. The French army instituted a rush program of elementary literacy. That's 1914. Or the decisions throughout North America today, be it in ads or in the press, to never use dependent clauses because, to most human beings, they are indecipherable. Thoroughly literate societies remain few. There is no serious bookstore as distinct from a kiosk between Rome and Bari, not one.

I loved the story from 1938, precisely documented, of one of the last exams for the baccalaureate in the University of Salamanca. The government knew the candidate was the young Duke of Alba. The government officials say to the examiners, "No nonsense, no nonsense! It is his grace, the Duke of Alba." "Yes, Yes." The Duke comes in and the trembling examiners ask, "Your Grace, you have read *Don Quixote*? Long silence. "Why should I?" he answered. If you are the Duke of Alba you don't need to read *Don Quixote*, or anything else. The point I am trying to make is that what was often confidently asserted as being literacy was nothing of the kind. Literacy was complex, often fragmentary, often local.

Why should I read? Classical literacy, *literi humanoraes* – what a magnificently proud and arrogant word – entails a number of fundamental assumptions and expectations that we rarely pause to examine. There is a sacredness of the foundational text, of the Ur-text, itself usually revealed or dictated, as on Mount Sinai, or on the Isle of Patmos to John.

One night in the very grim moments of Apartheid, when I was among my South African students, Nadine Gordimer did me the honour of inviting me to her house, along with ANC leaders – really militant ANC leaders. The police cars were lined up in front of Nadine's house. They knew exactly who was coming, but they didn't move. It was a peculiar twilight of permitted exceptions to the rule and Nadine's home was, in a sense, taboo. As my main virtue in life is a lack of tact, I decided to ask one of the great leaders, one of Slovo's lieutenants, "Look, help me. Even among the worst moments of occupation under the Waffen SS – and they were very good at occupying, believe me – from time to time, someone killed one of the bastards. You are thirteen to one in Johannesburg. Thirteen-to-one! It's a demographic balance. Without weapons, all you need to do is close in on the street around a white person. What is it that keeps you from acting?" The answer was one of the turning points in my life: the ANC leader said, "You Jews, you have your Talmud, your Midrash, your Mishnah. Communists among us, who are few, have Das Kapital. Christians have their Gospel. Muslims among us have their Koran. We have nothing. Africa has not produced a book." It is an enormous answer. Think of it. *We do not have a single foundational classic by which we could come to rally around an image of ourselves.* It needs a lot of thinking to grasp the full power, depth, and scruple of that answer. "We have no book."

The complex dialectic of letter via spirit, which underlies our tradition, even at its most secular, of the cleric, of the scholar, derives from the traditions of Scripture and inscription. The two words, of course, are cognate. My I remind you what the word underwritten means? Underwritten is re-insured by the theological: what Wittgenstein says on completing his investigations, "If I could, I would dedicate this book to God." That's Wittgenstein. The *magnum opus* in the Western traditions, "Le livre qui est le but de l'univers" of Mallarmé; or in Borges, a simulacrum of the book that simply calls itself the Book, the Bible. In certain traditions, Judaism for example, the notion of secular authorship, of reading for pleasure, comes very late. It arrives only with modernity and it leaves the greatest of all Jewish writers, Franz Kafka, radically uncomfortable. The arts of memory are correlative with those of all higher literacy. They constitute the bridge between the oral and the written. Plato fears writing precisely because it will enfeeble the muscles of memory; hence, the central, crucial, irreplaceable role of learning by heart. What you love, you start learning by heart.

We started in the French Lyceé, tiny children in those ridiculous blue Smocks: five lines and ten lines and twenty; learning by heart. For what you love, you will want to have inside you. We learned Pope's Iliad by rote. We learned Lear's nonsense rhymes by heart. Those children learned to tell the two apart and never say, "that ought I wrote in love I wrote only

for love of art." These lines of Robert Graves accompany me day and night. But there are so many others. What you have by heart, no one can touch. They cannot take it from you.

Consider the example of a Russian woman who was a teacher of English Romantic literature in the University in Kazakhstan. It was the Brezhnev years, relatively less hellish than Stalin, but still hell. She was imprisoned, with no light, on some trumped up charge, for three years, in solitary. Now, in Russia, for reasons I am not wholly competent to judge, Byron's Don Juan has canonic presence. It's regarded, maybe justly, as one of the transcendent achievements. This young woman knew it, thirty or thirty-four thousand lines by heart. And in the dark she dictated to herself a Russian verse translation. She lost her sight. But when she emerged, she dictated her translation, which is now the classic one in Russian. There is nothing you can do to a human being who is like that. No state can touch this. No despair can touch it. What you don't know by heart, you really haven't loved deeply enough. The poetry of Mandelstam, you remember, survived when Nadezhda, after the death of the poet, had ten people, no more, learning one of the poems. That was enough. There were no copies, and the KGB could do nothing. As long as ten people know a poem, it will live. Ben Johnson had the wonderful word for it, which we have lost: to ingest the text, to internalize it in the viscera of your spirit. The culture decays in precise proportion to its neglect, or suppression of memorization.

Again, in the Russian Writers' Congress of '37, in the blackness of the blackness, Boris Pasternak was told, "If you speak, we arrest you. If you don't, we arrest you, as a sign of contempt" Pasternak was tall, very handsome; he stood out in a crowd fantastically. On the third morning his friends said, "Boris, say something. They are going to arrest you, but say something. Give us something to remember, to live by." When the moment came, Boris got up and spoke a number. It took twenty seconds, maybe thirty, before two thousand people rose, holding hands, and began to recite Shakespeare's sonnet of that number, of which Pasternak's translation is a Russian classic, like Pushkin. He spoke out loud, "When I summon up remembrance of things past," and they didn't dare touch him. That culture was never in ultimate danger. Ours is every day. There is an immense difference. *"When I summon up remembrance of things past."*

The classic act of reading, of literacy, presumes three possibilities. Silence: the availability of silence, when today silence has become the most expensive luxury, when even in the new expensive apartments, the walls are thin. When the fear of silence is such that you cannot even step into an elevator in New York without the muzak oozing on. They explain that people are frightened of silence, frightened to be alone. Silence has become almost unattainable. Children are afraid of it. We are enveloped by constant noise. Privacy, which is related to silence, requires being unafraid to be alone. On the contrary, one covets it, seeks it out; one does not know that nonsense phrase, "peer pressure." There is no pressure except that of one's own integrity and concentration. Malebranche, as quoted by Heidegger over and over again, said, "Concentration is the natural piety of the soul." To be able to concentrate totally. You cannot read a difficult text without total concentration.

America – and this is not an anti-American comment (I hate that sort of cheapness) – is more honest of its disasters than we are in Europe. The latest statistic is that over eighty percent of American adolescents cannot read in silence without some kind of music in the background. Also quite terrifying is the flicker effect at the edge of their vision, the television. What this does to the cortex we haven't begun to understand. It would need extensive psychological and social examination of the current experience of solitude as punitive and traumatic, of the shortening of the attention span among the young and adults.

It would be sentimental nonsense to think that we can officially recreate the foundations of the classic act of literacy. Pythagoras and Plato intuited, and Galileo demonstrated that, to quote his famous saying, "Nature speaks mathematics." Since Galileo and Newton, that speech has become the ever-expanding idiom of a scientific and technological handling of the world. It is the lingua franca of the reality principle. Verbal and written languages cover less and less of verifiable, evolving experience. No aspect, no single facet of our lives, inward and outward, will be unchanged by the three horizons now looming. I owe this, of course, not to any competence on my part but I have had the privilege of living among the great scientists. Heidegger used to say if you are really stupid, you tell a story. I confess to that guilt. Recently we had a truly delightful American guest at the high table of my college. He had been for a holiday in Scandinavia and, in the nicest way, he was saying to us, "I hope all of you do that. It is the nicest, friendliest place on earth." And he turns to a very shy, gray-haired colleague sitting next to him. "Have you been to Stockholm?" My colleague, keeping his head down, said, "Once." The guest didn't understand, and we were so shy for the guest that we rapidly covered it with conversation. We didn't want him to be embarrassed. My colleague had not meant to be clever or arrogant, God knows. He was simply being accurate. Of course, when you say "once" in Cambridge to the question "have you been to Stockholm," you have gone for the Nobel. That is what I call the aristocracy of the mind; that is what I want to live among, and have been lucky to be able to do.

Here are the three horizons of which my colleagues are trying to give me a layman's stupid inkling: the creation of life in vitro; self-replicating molecules, which they put at ten years away (this may be conservative); and the theory of everything, which is a technical expression. A theory of everything, as Hawking and his colleagues are developing it, is on the origins of the universe and of time. We translate it more or less metaphorically. The neuro-chemistry of consciousness – the word I, moi, ego – is an arrangement of blood sugar. This is by no means fantastic or remote – for instance, we have no theory of aspirin (no one knows why an aspirin works, or what it does when you take it). We have no theory regarding the fact that there are many human beings for whom even one drink – a drop of alcohol in the cortex – can have severe consequences. And so the notion that consciousness may be a matter of neuro-chemistry is already imaginable even to the layman.

These are what they call the three "holy grails," a curious borrowing, which at the moment concentrate the most active, adventurous minds among us. Any serious grasp of what is involved requires a numeracy of increasingly sophisticated order. It is numeracy, rather than literacy, that will enable the majority of human beings to cope with their altering world, the joy of their world.

I hope many of you remember the passage in Cellini's autobiography when he is going to find out whether the great statue of Perseus has burst or is alright within the hot casement, the melting wax having being knocked away to reveal it. Not only Cellini, but the Florentine historians say several thousand people crowded in the street that night, hoping to see it, hoping to find out.

I guess hundreds of people were crowding in the streets of Little Cambridge, in East Anglia, the night Professor Wiles said he would announce the solution to Fermat's last theorem. After 370 years, a solution arrived at, not by any computer or electronic nonsense, but a pencil and paper and seven years of unrelenting thought. People were crowding the street. The little hall in the Institute for Mathematics, where it was to be revealed, can take eighty people or so; the rest were in the street. And among those eighty, I was told, two could follow the demonstration. That didn't matter. My common room that night sang like a beehive. I can put it in no less naive a way. I said, "Can you help me?" And they said, "Look

Steiner, there were four roads of approach and he chose the most beautiful." And I said, "Right, you can help me. Keats chooses beauty. Beauty, truth." "No," they said, "we are using beauty not in a metaphoric sense but in a concrete sense, in an enormously concrete, specific sense." Again, I can be a great bore, so I said, "Can you help me?" Now, great scientists are generous, not like we humanists. And so they tried, and finally one of them said, "Don't get angry. It would take twenty years to get you to the edge of elliptical curve theory, where the edge begins, so you could know what Professor Wiles has done to solve Fermat's last theorem and the beauty of it." And so I, in a rearguard action of absolute despair, said, "That's alright." Professor Weseltier of Harvard once said to me, "Before you are allowed to look at a page of Kabbala it is twenty-five years of preparation." I felt an ache, a physical ache, of the beauty of it, totally inaccessible to me.

Literature has scarcely begun to do minimal homework. Hence it's thinness and domesticity; hence the belief that adultery in Long Island is an interesting subject. It has scarcely begun to be serious. There has been a small number of very great writers who have not been lazy, who've actually tried to find out what the world is now about – Thomas Mann, who worked two years with a tutor before doing the magnificent chapters on astrophysics in *Felix Krull*; Robert Musil, who was, of course, a trained mathematician and engineer; and perhaps Pynchon and the masters of science fiction, whom we tend not to take seriously but whose vision has been clairvoyant, terrifyingly prophetic. In essence, the novel inhabits a nineteenth century cosmology. We tend to forget that the heroic verse epic continued for many centuries until it came to its dismal end, having totally outlived the mythological and cosmological structures that had generated its validity.

The second subversive element of any classic literacy is even more radical and difficult to define. I may have this totally wrong. In the West, the status of death is undergoing a sea change. We are in the midst of what may be the deepest reaching tectonic-plate shock in Western history. From 1914 onward, we see bewildering new worlds of mass death on a wholly unprecedented scale. Remember Passchendaele, when on the first day in 1916 an estimated 45,000 people died. The new worlds of cloning, of genetic manipulation, of transplant, are what Foucault called "the abolition of the self." This is now taking on biological potentiality. "Death, where will be thy sting?" This is an immensely perplexing and fascinating mutation of consciousness that I can only allude to, but it bears directly on our subject. Western literacy has been one of the strategies, one of the master strategies contra death. It has harboured intimations, as Wordsworth would have it, of immortality, aspirations to immortality, from its origins on. Magnificently, Pindar says, "The city for which I am writing this ode will perish. The language in which I am writing it may perish but my poetry will live forever." Horace and Ovid were translated into what every child still had to learn in my time. Tougher than brass, stronger than marble, these lines will live. That fine, Stalinist poet, Paul Éluard, puts it in a single phrase, "le dur désir de durer": The harsh desire to last. That is the mechanism of all attempts at great literature. Today already a certain embarrassment attaches to this commanding motion. If you want to be funny in France you cite the title given to themselves by members of the French Academy, *Les Immortels*. This fills everyone, except the gentlemen in question, with embarrassment.

Art is flirting with the aleatory, and with self-destruction. M. Baudrillard movingly evoked the caverns of Lascaux, or I could say Altamira. This came to an end on a specific date: it being rare that a great movement in history has a calendar date. It came on a late afternoon in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Tinguely, in front of a large crowd, having set up a splendid metal and partially Calderesque but very different structure of meaning, set fire to it and as it collapsed he said quite clearly, "Je ne veux pas durer": I don't want to last. And perhaps with that ended that which at Altamira and

Lascaux had begun by saying, I want to last. Tinguely doesn't want to last. It's ephemeral. It's collective. It's anonymous. It's a happening. It's a moment. Because the desire to last is, at a central level, that of a very natural and often vulnerable artistic vanity. It is that of a link with a transcendent belief now no longer available. In this light, it is both uncertain and blinding. It is in the light of these changes that we must together try and redefine the word literacy, even though in only the most provisional, tentative way. Anything else would be arrogance.

The saturation of daily lives by electronic means of communication, of information storage and retrieval and learning methods, will inevitably comport increasing familiarity with the near mathematical and logically formal languages and sensibility. Never forget that your computer, wherever it is in the world, is speaking Victorian English; its structure is that of Boolean algebra, which is not the only algebra available. It could have been based on Indian algebraic thought, which is very different. It is speaking a kind of Esperanto with deep roots in the nineteenth-century English confidence in logic. Increasingly, orality, writing, and reading, as we have known them, will take on highly specialized functions, as did reading and writing throughout the ancient and medieval worlds. There is nothing new in this. We harbour the illusion that our literacy was an inevitable, natural, and ubiquitous form. It was not. There may again be what Rabbi Akiba, after the destruction of the temple, called "houses of reading" for people who actually know how to sit in silence and read a serious text without secondary sources of any kind.

My illustrious colleague in Geneva, John Starobinski, never had a book of criticism on any desk. He read the text. He read it at four levels, which I then tried to do. I said we will start with the dictionary, the infinite poetry, the poetics of looking up words, of knowing, trying to know their history. Secondly, we will proceed with something difficult: grammar. Grammar is the music of the mind and of thought. I can't take seriously someone who waffles to me about Milton's greatness and can't explain to me why there are four gerunds in the beginning of "Lycidus," someone, in short, who probably doesn't know what a gerund is. Milton did. Milton was a supreme musician of syntax. It is no accident. He is no latinate show-off. Imagine the music student who would dare say to the teacher, "No, no scales. I have deep feelings about Chopin." This is what we in Letters have done. We have sold out to trash. We ask less and less of our students. We no longer ask for the ancient languages, without which I did not take students in comparative literature. It is criminal nonsense to say that you can talk about European literature without some attempt to know Greek and Latin and how they live in the vulgate. And then I'm told, "How, for God's sake, can you ask that?"

When you pass from the first year, which is an apprentice year – provisional, tentative – to the second in the Harvard Medical School, you can only go on to the second year if you take the pharmacology exam, which comports learning by heart some twelve hundred formulas, many of them intricate. And it is the same story every year. For the first few weeks, it is "I will commit suicide. I will quit medicine. I have ten Valiums a night." Slowly, slowly these perfectly wonderful young human beings realize they can do it. The powers of memory are infinite. The muscles of memory, once you wake them and exercise them, they can take the exam. It's not a sadistic or trivial demand. If you get the wrong formula, the patient dies. So it's about something – something real and important. And we in the arts ask less and less; how deeply ashamed we should be. As Spinoza said, "All things excellent are difficult."

The way you honour a human being is to ask of him an effort. In the hopeless popularization and down-marketing of our crafts we don't honour the student. We condescend to him and that is a hideous contempt. You honour him by what you ask and

demand. If the dear old Lombards had passed eleven kilometres nearer to St. Gal when they poured down the Alps and set it on fire as they did every other monastery, we would not have our Horace, our Virgil, our Catullus, our Ovid. One monastery hung by a thread, the monks copying the text, copying day and night and saving for us what was, until very recently, the literacy, the alphabet of civilization.

Numeracy will move closer to centres of competence and we have been desperately slow and unimaginative about teaching mathematics, about introducing what Virginia Woolf called "the common reader" to its creative powers and beauty: that being the other great universal language. Please, let's have no nonsense about Anglo-American being the planetary language. When I was at the Institute in Princeton as a young man, one was allowed, by the grace of Oppenheimer, to sit in sometimes on the seminars, even if you could not understand. I watched at the board some of the princes of the world, Japanese, Russian, and American, working together at top speed without sharing a word of each other's language: Leibnitz's great dream, mathematics with its dialects, its wit, its sadness, its grandeur, belonging to the whole world. Everyone could speak to the man next to him as they worked together. The most eerie and wonderful moment was when they laughed. Either, as I gather because it had gone wrong or because there is a wit, which we can't fathom, as there is in many Haydn studies. Many Haydn cadenzas are funny and are meant to be funny. Music and mathematics: the two codes of universality.

All I am doing is quoting Plato, of course. We haven't tried to understand how to teach. Give me any child from any background and I will put on the blackboard one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, and underneath, the even numbers, two, four, six, eight, ten. I will ask the child, "How can there be as many even numbers as there are numbers?" I will try to have the nerve to let the silence settle, because it is out of the silence that there may come very slowly, tentatively, God knows, the spark of the question, of the wonder, of the exasperation which will lead, believe it or not, to the notion which Descartes says is the proof of God in us: the notion of the infinite, because only that can help you understand why these two series are homological, one to one to one. And there will be in that room children for whom the fire will start. And it need never go out if they are properly taught and loved, if they are not condescended to. And they don't need to know that transfinite cardinal numbers are a damned difficult concept, far beyond me. They don't need to know that. That's how this demonstration starts. We can start there and stop at a much earlier moment, with the sheer joy of it, the sheer animal joy of understanding something infinitely deep.

And there are bridges. Two fields that should be part of early school training are architecture and music. Goethe said, when going to the temple of Sagesta in Sicily up on the mountain, "Now I know the gods have visited man." It is perhaps the most perfect temple built. Henry Adams said when he wrote his book on Chartres, "Now I know that man's aspirations can reach to God." I hope many of you, like myself, have been to Bilbao to see the Guggenheim Museum. It will stand with Sagesta. It will stand with Chartres. It soars into infinity. I can't put it any other way. The light travels along the walls, reshaping at every hour as the sun circles. There are areas of silence in it that have an indescribable power and beauty. At every moment it is counterintuitive. The architect has put the heavy on top and the light below it. When you read Mr. Gehry's notes, and I hope you will, he says, "Careful, I didn't do it." He names the computer program in California that, far beyond the present possibilities of the human cortex, can figure out what critical curves are possible for walls of titanium. It can tell him how the light will move in different months of the year and different hours of the day. It will tell him – apparently a fantastically difficult thing – what happens to sight lines and noise when you have a lot of people in the museum, when

you have a few people in the museum, or when they come from one hall to the other. This is entirely beyond our present computational mental abilities, but it is open to the computer. Of course, one wants to say to him, "But, Sir, you asked the right questions and that is an immortal achievement." But it is already something very different from the architects of Chartres and Segesta. To come somewhat near it, to teach children and ourselves what Plato knew by heart: the way in which architecture and mathematics play together with space and volume and light and sound is one possible program. The other, of course, is music.

From Vladivostok to Tierra del Fuego, on the Walkman, they are listening to the same hit as they walk down the street. Levi-Strauss defined this as "Le mystère suprême des sciences de l'homme," the supreme mystery of the sciences of man, "l'invention d'une mélodie," the invention of a melody. Music is a totally universal language. Children are magnificently good at it and responsive to it. Also, and I quote Boulez, "So much of my music now can only be fully understood by those who can read an algebraic algorithm." Again, joy, the wonder, the fun of it, the marvellous fun of it, so much of which has gone out of traditional forms of humanistic teaching. These are not, in any way, utopian or science fiction counsels. They can be shown to work. They demand the solution that you pay your teachers in school, your teachers of languages and mathematics, as much as a university professor and see that the society honours them correspondingly. We now, in England, have a death-trap situation. Cambridge is, along with MIT, Stanford, and Harvard, still *primus inter pares* in mathematical teaching. They are good on research, but the excellent go immediately for vast salaries into public accounting and banking: salaries which even at the start, outstrip what a professor can hope for at the end of his life. And the very bad go to teach mathematics.

We classify a first, a second, or a third. Those who get thirds will teach mathematics. So you have a self-reproducing cycle of vengeful mediocrity in the most crucial moments, that of the child. But it can be solved. The Stalinist solution worked, and for many years. Russian primary and secondary school training in mathematics, sciences, and languages was the best in the world. It honoured the teacher, making it the most rewarding and not the most punishing of careers. This does not mean for a moment that we will not continue to love literature – that we will not continue in a few of our cases to try and learn it by heart, a little bit every day, a little bit every morning. And I can tell you that trying to learn prose by heart is hell. I know people that can do it very beautifully, but it's very, very difficult. You have to hear the music in the prose, you have to let your memory pick up the syncopation, and even then it is difficult – but do try, even if you fail.

Know that Heidegger is both right and totally wrong when he says, "The sciences only have answers, the arts, only questions." It's both right and wrong. It is a wonderfully provocative challenge. The questions posed to us by great literature are indeed the recurrent ones, but to persist in asking them without the scruple of awareness of what is happening to our intellectual world is, I think, a blind arrogance for which we are already paying a very high price. God knows, statistics must not be taken verbatim. Nevertheless when UNESCO, in last year's survey of education, claims that some eighty-two percent of those at the highest end of the curve of intelligence are now in the sciences, that's something to think about.

There are bridges. There are efforts to be undertaken. Above all, there are joys, enormous joys to experience. Do honour to your students. I had the incredible luck to be at the University of Chicago with Hutchins one day, and Hutchins had a rule that even freshmen were allowed to sit against the wall in a graduate seminar on the condition that they didn't open their mouths. I had heard that Leo Strauss had announced a seminar, "Plato and the Polis." I sat against a wall, and this little, formidable man walked in and said, I have never

forgotten a single second of that moment, "In this seminar, the name of who was incomparable will not be mentioned." I didn't catch the name. I was nervous, and I went up to a graduate student afterward, and I said, "Look, can you help me?" He said, "I will write it down for you." Martin Heidegger. So I rushed to the library on the Midway and got out *Sein und Zeit*. I couldn't understand the first sentence; I was totally helpless. And I kept trying and trying. I kept it open in front of me, and I felt, not defeated, not mocked, not condescended to, but infinitely honoured by the provocation.

What should a teacher be? A person with a summons, with a calling, *provocare*. A provocation is what teaching is – to call you out. A good Anglo-Saxon expression: I shall call you out. "Have at you, Sir, be on guard." Provocation: You must always pitch above the head of your student until his fingers ache with reaching. I think it is the most exciting process in the world. I. A. Richards said, "The two most complex processes on this planet are the mathematics of a string quartet and the translation of a Chinese philosophic sentence." He may be right. They are worth pursuing, and are in certain respects wholly familiar to Plato when he writes over the doors of the Academy, "Let no one enter here who is not a geometer." Wholly familiar to Plato, wholly familiar to Pythagoras, with his hope that music would open the doors to cosmology and to the problem of the inner harmony of human beings. For others, of course, there will be a post-humanity, which, I am not altogether sorry, I will not live to see.

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