

# The New York Times

## George Steiner, Prodigious Literary Critic, Dies at 90

He ranged over subjects like the origins of speech, the moral power of literature and the future of truth — and sometimes drew criticism himself.

By [Christopher Lehmann-Haupt](#) and [William Grimes](#), Feb. 3, 2020



George Steiner in 2004. He was an essayist, fiction writer, teacher, scholar and literary critic and fluent in three languages.

George Steiner, a literary polymath and man of letters whose voluminous criticism often dealt with the paradox of literature's moral power and its impotence in the face of an event like the Holocaust, died on Monday at his home in Cambridge, England. He was 90.

His death was confirmed by his son, Dr. David Steiner.

An essayist, fiction writer, teacher, scholar and literary critic — he succeeded Edmund Wilson as senior book reviewer for *The New Yorker* from 1966 until 1997 — Mr. Steiner both dazzled and dismayed his readers with the range and occasional obscurity of his literary references.

Essential to his views, as he avowed in “Grammars of Creation,” a book based on [the Gifford Lectures](#) he delivered at the University of Glasgow in 1990, “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.”

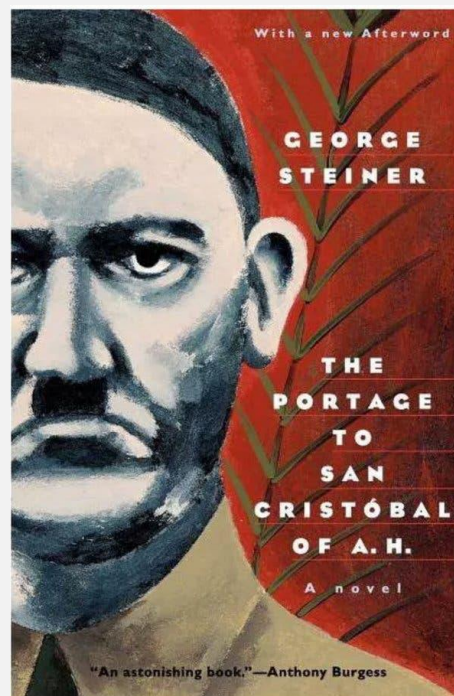
His own speech was polyglot. “On a level self-evidently minor,” he wrote in a memoir of his intellectual development, “Errata: An Examined Life” (1998), “I owe to the cross-weave of three initial languages” — the French, German and English in which he was reared — “to their pulse and flicker within me, the very conditions of my life and work.”

From this “pulse and flicker,” he confessed, arose the major preoccupations of his thinking life — among them the origins of human speech, the myth of the Tower of Babel and its meaning for humankind, the benefits of being at home in different languages, the true tasks of the translator and the superiority of multilingual, or, as he called them, “extraterritorial,” writers like Beckett, Borges and Nabokov.

He pursued these preoccupations in more than two-dozen books, including essay collections, a novella and three collections of short stories. With Harold Bloom ([who died in October](#)), he argued on behalf of the canon of Western art and against a procession of critical movements, from the [New Criticism](#) of the 1950s to post-structuralism and deconstruction of the 1960s, whose advent he foresaw in an early essay, “The Retreat From the Word.”

Mr. Steiner’s quasi-religious view of literature informed his first book, the comparative study “Tolstoy or Dostoevsky” (1959), which was pointedly subtitled “An Essay in the Old Criticism.”

“The old criticism is engendered by admiration,” he wrote in the first chapter. “It sometimes steps back from the text to look upon moral purpose. It thinks of literature as existing not in isolation but as central to the play of historical political energies. Above all, the old criticism is philosophic in range and temper.”



Mr. Steiner’s novella “The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.” is an imagined postwar life for Adolf Hitler.

He remained constant to this article of faith throughout his long career, ranging widely over subjects as varied as Heidegger, Greek tragedy, chess, literary translation, the future of truth as an idea and, in his novella “The Portage to San Cristóbal of A.H.,” an imagined postwar life for Adolf Hitler.

He was a divisive figure. Admirers of Mr. Steiner found his erudition and his arguments brilliant. Detractors complained that he was vaporous, pretentious and often inaccurate.

“His bracing virtue has been his ability to move from Pythagoras, through Aristotle and Dante, to Nietzsche and Tolstoy in a single paragraph,” the cultural critic Lee Siegel wrote in [“Our Steiner Problem — and Mine,”](#) an essay for The New York Times Book Review in 2009. “His irritating vice has been that he can move from Pythagoras, through Aristotle and Dante, to Nietzsche and Tolstoy in a single paragraph.”

Mr. Steiner complained in his memoir of having “scattered and, thus, wasted my strengths.” He added, “As the close comes nearer, I know that my crowded solitude, that the absence of any school or movement originating in my work, and that the sum of its imperfections are, in considerable measure, of my own doing.”

In 2009, in “My Unwritten Books,” he described the seven works that might have seen the light of day but remained in his head. “It is the unwritten book which might have made the difference,” he wrote. “Which might have allowed one to fail better. Or perhaps not.”



Mr. Steiner at the Harvard Club in Manhattan in 1998. He emerged from the tradition of the European intelligentsia.

Francis George Steiner was born on April 23, 1929, into a Jewish family living in Paris. His birth was assisted, he revealed in “Errata,” by a doctor ([Carl Weiss](#)) who then returned to Louisiana to assassinate Huey Long. His investment-banker father, Frederick George Steiner, and mother, Elsie (Franzos) Steiner, had left Vienna in 1924 because of the rising tide of anti-Semitism there and had chosen France over England for its milder climate and its presumed benefits to Frederick Steiner’s fragile health.

Reared to speak French, English and German interchangeably and encouraged to read widely in the classics by his closely attentive father, George emigrated with his family to New York City in 1940 and attended the Lycée Français, becoming a naturalized citizen in 1944 and receiving his French baccalaureate in 1947.

Turning down the offer of an abbreviated path to a bachelor’s degree at Yale because of what he perceived as condescension to Jews, he enrolled at the University of Chicago and earned his B.A. there after one year of study, in 1948. After receiving his master’s degree from Harvard in 1950, he won a Rhodes Scholarship to Balliol College, Oxford, where his doctoral thesis was initially rejected. A revised version, later published as “The Death of Tragedy,” was accepted, and he received his doctorate in English literature in 1955.

That same year he married Zara Alice Shakow, who became a historian of international relations. In addition to his son, his wife survives him along with a daughter, Deborah Tarn, who is a philologist, and two grandchildren.

In 1952, Mr. Steiner joined the editorial staff of *The Economist*, where he remained until 1956. After obtaining his doctorate, he became a fellow of the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, then was appointed Christian Gauss Lecturer at Princeton from 1959 to 1960. From Princeton he went to Cambridge University, where he remained for the rest of his life, first as a fellow of Churchill College (1961-1969), then as an Extraordinary Fellow. He was an honorary fellow of Balliol College, Oxford.

At various times he also taught or lectured at the University of Geneva, New York University and Harvard, where he was appointed the Charles Eliot Norton professor of poetry for 2001-2002.

His many books include “Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman” (1967), “In Bluebeard’s Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture” (1971) and “After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation” (1975).

Again and again, either directly or indirectly, Mr. Steiner tried to define the meaning of culture in an age overwhelmed by atrocities. In the preface to “Language and Silence,” he wrote, “My own consciousness is possessed by the eruption of barbarism in modern Europe, by the mass murder of the Jews and by the destruction under Nazism and Stalinism of what I try to define in some of these essays as the particular genius of ‘Central European humanism.’”

This, he wrote, was the defining problem of his life, the source of the moral urgency behind his criticism.

“I’d love to be remembered as a good teacher of reading,” he told The Paris Review in 1994. Characteristically, he had a specific, lofty notion of reading as a moral calling. It should, he added, “commit us to a vision, should engage our humanity, should make us less capable of passing by.”

***(<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/03/books/george-steiner-dead.html>)***