

George Steiner

Born 1929.

Autobiographical life story.

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This life story is based, with thanks and acknowledgement, on the transcript by Sarah Harrison of a filmed interview by Prof. Alan Macfarlane, University of Cambridge on 23rd July 2011. The filmed interview can be viewed here: <https://www.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1130599>

1. My Early Life

George, where were you born and when?

I was born in Paris, in 1929. My father was of Czech origin, but had grown up and been educated in Vienna. My mother was Viennese, and by a miracle of foresight or of instinct - I would call it an instinct of apprehension - my father had left Vienna in 1924. He was convinced that a form of Nazism was coming, and transferred us to Paris. He started his life all over again. And I was educated in the French Lycee system.

The key fact is that I was educated totally trilingually. There was no difference between German, French and English in my upbringing. At home, and in every aspect of my childhood this was really the central fact. And from a very early date on, my father sensed that English would probably be the world language. A language in which the future would develop. This flew very much in the face of French linguistic chauvinism. But it made for a very creative tension in my own growing up.

My mother was a brilliant linguist in her own right, and a Viennese grande dame. Now a Viennese grande dame meant a certain kind of enlightened cynicism and intellectual elegance. Very very much a woman up with the development of the world. And I owe my parents everything. My bitter quarrel - bitter is an exaggerated word - my deep quarrel with psychoanalysis being that I regard it as utter nonsense. I had no wish to make love to my mother, or to kill my father. They were the best friends I had in the world, in a relationship of constant fun and excitement.

I would emphasise that my father was a very distinguished, internationally known, investment banker. He set himself one purpose in life - that I should never know anything of that business. He would not even tell me what the difference was between a bond and a share. He hoped and he worked for the idea that I would be some kind of scholar and teacher. Now let me immediately open a large and central footnote. That is a deeply Judaic point of view. The word Rabbi, as you know, means teacher.

If you ask me today, did my father in some way inhibit in me the hope of being a creative artist - I drew and painted a great deal as a child - the answer might be yes. Of course he loved the classics. He read them to me and we studied them together. But somewhere in him and in the tradition which he stood for was a view that being a teacher was more important than being a creator. I put this in too abstract a way, but it is terribly important. And it determined perhaps the natural limitations in my own life. He still lived to see me having a number of very major university chairs, and this filled him with a deep satisfaction.

I think he would have been proud of course if I had been able to be a distinguished artist or novelist. But I don't think it would have brought him the same satisfaction.

And your mother?

My mother had as a goal to make of me someone who, having a rather severe physical handicap, would regard that as a privilege. Now let me take that slowly

because it is the other crucial element. From the beginning, not only did she refuse any compromise. For the first eight or nine years of my life I had to be in constant remedial treatment, which was very painful and very difficult. At some very early date - I wish I could identify it - she said 'Do you realise how fantastically lucky you are? You are not going to do military service'.

And that is probably one of the turning points in my life. From that day on I regarded myself as fantastically lucky. Footnote within footnote - she was right. God knows what would have happened to my life had I had to serve in the war. I didn't. And this turning of a great handicap into a privilege, into a pleasure, was a stroke of pure genius. But she would not compromise. Already at that time you had slip-on shoes or shoes with a zip. She refused. I went through hell learning to tie the knot on a shoe lace. Not a very useful or necessary art, but morally an enormous triumph. I shall never forget the ecstasy when I was able to achieve that. But it was painful, and long, and full of disappointment.

So I not only had the sense of being tremendously lucky being handicapped, but also the feeling that there is nothing you cannot achieve if rightly guided. If there is someone who turns a difficulty into a joy. That has, I think presided over my whole life. It was a pretty magnificent start.

I think if you don't mind viewers will probably want to know what the handicap was.

It was a birth accident. A right arm without any natural motion, to this day. At the time the wisdom was - use the left hand whenever possible. Let him right with the left hand. Mama decided that was completely wrong, and I fought my way through to writing, as I do, with my right hand. She said there was no question of these nonsensical compromises with the inevitable. There was no inevitable for her. And my whole philosophy of education, my intense opposition to the present kind of therapeutic political correctness, is that on the contrary the handicaps and difficulties are the wellspring not only of will and achievement, that is easy, but of joy - and that is much more difficult.

Did you have brothers or sisters?

Yes, I had a sister seven years older than myself. I have recently lost her. That age distance meant she really looked after me and took care of me more than a sister normally would. I was so young and she was already a teenager. And that was very important during the war and in the time that led up to our next move, which was to the United States.

What was the role of religion in your childhood?

Father was an utter Voltairian. A very ironic Voltairian. So was my grande dame mother. The only prayer she taught me was 'I am bad. I could be better. But it really doesn't matter'. She had me say this as a very young child, and it has guided my life. On the other hand we marked a number of the high holidays, out piety towards my parents' parents and out of solidarity with the Jewish community. Not in a religious sense, but in a sense of history. My father taught me a great deal of Jewish history and Jewish philosophy and Jewish thought. But entirely in an agnostic or Voltairian way.

Did you go to France to begin with?

Indeed I did. First I went to the Lycee in the neighbourhood, as everyone did. Then briefly to the American school in Paris to get the English into absolutely good shape.

Were there any teachers there who particularly influenced you?

That comes later. We escaped from France by a miracle in 1940, just as I was becoming eleven years old. So the great influences will come later, in New York.

What was the miracle?

The miracle was getting out. My father was already in the United States on a French Government mission, and got permission for Mama and the two children to visit him. The visit turned into rather a long one! We were able to leave with the last American ship that got out of Genoa before Mussolini closed the harbour and invaded France.

So you went down to Italy from Paris?

Yes. We couldn't get out from France because there were no ships leaving. But we got out through Genoa.

2. United States of America

Can you remember your first arrival in America?

Yes. You will laugh at this, and it shouldn't really be known, but it has appeared in a number of biographical essays. On the dock my father said to me 'Remember, we are going back'. Those were the first words he spoke to me. Mama was very upset because she rightly felt we should make a go of it in the United States.

My sister fell promptly in love with America, because being a late teenager in France was hell and it was heaven in America.

Was it heaven for you?

No. My father saw to it that it wouldn't be. I remember the night when he woke me saying Marshal von Paulus (right) has surrendered at Stalingrad. We are going to be on the way home. It might take a long time, but he knew from that moment that the war was won. And that had nothing to do with Pearl Harbour or the American intervention. It was the Red Army that made sure that one day we would go home.



So you now go to a new school?

A brief experiment in a very coveted American high school, which went very very wrong. I hated every moment of it. The turning point is very amusing because it is a story against ourselves. They have in America something called Parents' Day, when the parents come and sit in on class. It was the class in Ancient History. We were asked why Herodotus praised Athens so much in his history. Answer - he was paid to do so. My father took me out that day - out of this distinguished American school - and put me where I wanted to go in the French Lycee in New York. Footnote: the answer was perfectly right. Contrary to my father's idealistic beliefs, Herodotus was bribed - but thereby hands a quite different tale.

I blossomed in the French Lycee. It was exactly right for me. And I did have one or two great teachers. This was because people of international renown were earning their living teaching children in the French Lycee. Some of them, like the great Claude Levi-Strauss (right), then got university jobs. But for quite a while they were teaching kids in the Lycee. So just imagine I had some of the great stars of the mind teaching me.



You had Levi-Strauss?

Yes. He was helping teach geography. I am not sure he knew any, but why not. He then got his

advancement to the Advanced School of Studies. I went to his lectures in my last year at the Lycee. It was possible to go to these lectures given by quite brilliant members of the French intellectual refugee community.

You remained interested in Levi-Strauss for many years afterwards, I think?

Yes, it certainly started then. It was then renewed when I discovered that he was a distant cousin of Proust. I came to discover that *Tristes Tropiques*, whatever its anthropological merits which I am not qualified to judge, is one of the ultimate classics of French prose.



He was a good lecturer?

No. No. Others were magnificent lecturers. There were scholars of every kind. Then one day a lady in a leather skirt - a curious detail which has stuck with me - marched in with a Mexican brooch on her ample front. She gave us a guest lecture on why we should be interested in philosophy. She was a lady called Simone de Beauvoir (right), and she was doing a lecture tour of the United States. So I was spoiled!

And were you persuaded why you should be interested in philosophy?

Totally!

Were you already starting to get interested in particular topics or disciplines by this time?

Yes. The multiplicity of languages was the condition in which I lived. For example, some of the teachers who had escaped from France would not speak a word of English, the idiots, in order to keep their French pure. In order not to yield to American vulgarity. Others learnt further languages. I had colleagues who were learning Spanish in New York, and doing it very very well. I was interested in the problems of the relationship between language and thought, and between language and identity, very very early on.

Do you think that identity, given that you are between so many different traditions and cultures, one of the central interests you have always had?

It is central, and it is the reason why I have always been marginalised by the deep provinciality of the English academic life. By its refusal to learn languages. This is a monoglot country. In my Geneva seminar there were around the table at one point fifteen languages spoken by my doctoral students. Which is what comparative literature and the study of philosophy is really about. Yes, it was utterly determinant. But in America bear in mind that from the tip of Manhattan where it goes into the Atlantic to the northern tip of Long Island there are 128 languages which are spoken. And that has become more so since the forties and fifties.

So you felt at home there with all these languages?

I delighted in that, as I did in the availability of every kind of music and art. The New York Public Library is probably one of the great universities. They let in young students, and they help you and they guide you. It was at that time an incomparable instrument of learning.

And you were quite close to it?

No. No. The French Lycee is quite high up on 96th Street, but there was a bus straight down Fifth Avenue.

Were there things about America in that first school that you didn't take to?

I couldn't accept the lack of irony. I couldn't accept the kind of ostentation patriotism, pledging allegiance to the flag and so on. It was very alien to me, very strange. And the Judaism I came from, the historical one, was not of course the observant or very committed one of the New York Jewish community.

The lack of irony has always been a puzzle to many people. I have my theories, what are yours?

It's a land committed to things being better next Monday than they are this Monday. It's a country committed to the dream that more people will be happy than ever before. Irony is the enemy. Irony subverts; irony is being rather nasty about hope. And in American being nasty about hope is lese majesty.

That's very interesting. So you are now how old, about 16 or 17?

Yes, 16 or 17. I did both my baccalaureates. The exams were sent out from Paris - a good Napoleonic system! There were three great French Lycees in the new world - Montreal, New York, and Rio. And the exams took place on the same hour on the same day. I had both my baccalaureates. And my father with great effort and sacrifice made it possible for me to go to Yale. Yale had something called Orientation Week. In my case that was a fatal mistake. I went up for that Orientation Week, and the first person I met was a boy who had been to the Lycee two years before me. He said don't come here. And I said why. He said, in a friendly helpful way, there's no place here for Jews.

Now let's be very careful. The first Jew to get tenure at Yale, Hempel, was in 1948. He was in mathematical logic, which was regarded as a crazy, marginal field. There was no place for Jews. What was I going to do? I had read in Time magazine - the instrument of all human knowledge! - about this fantastic place called the University of Chicago, where there was a revolutionary, completely new idea.

You came and sat exams in all the subjects you were interested in. And if you got an Alpha, you didn't need to take the subject. It suited a fantastically arrogant French Lycee product like me. I sat 14 final exams, In ten I got Alpha, and in four I got Gamma Minus. Now, that was a great revelation. They were Mathematics, Physics, Biology, and something called Social Science. I did not know what that meant. So into Mathematics, Physics, Biology and Social Science went young Mr Steiner.

3. University of Chicago

Working around the clock, I fell in love with science. Deeply, hopelessly, the point being that the teachers were the ultimate teachers. I had Fermi in physics, and Fermi said to us in the opening class - and I remember that as clearly as you sitting opposite to me today - there is no textbook, because we all have to learn together. We don't yet know what nuclear physics is. And Urey - another Nobel Prizewinner in chemistry, and a man you certainly know about in social anthropology called Redfield. And I fell in love utterly with science.

I had a fantastic time at the university, and was able to do my BA in one year. This meant that I could go into graduate school at the time when others were just starting their undergraduate course. Whether that is a good thing I leave for others to judge.

So I march in head high, nose high, to what was called in America your graduate advisor. He was a great mathematician called Kaplansky. He called for my exam papers - I had a First - and he said you are technically an idiot in the Aristotelian sense. Having been fantastically trained in the French Lycee system you have an absolute memory and you have learned endless formulas by heart. There is not a spark of mathematical creativity. Please do not try to go into science.

Big footnote. They had a sign over the gate, in Chicago, into the science block. Nuclear physics or bottle washing. Now, this happened five years later, when a young gentleman called Jim Watson had the same interview. He was weak in maths, and they sent him to biology, next door, with the results the world knows. I just came in at the height of the nuclear obsession, when they really thought all science was physics, and rightly you need creative maths to do physics.

I was utterly heartbroken, but I began with two very great teachers in literature and philosophy. The philosopher was McKeon - the great Aristotelian. And in literature I had T.S.Eliot's close colleague Tait. But it took me a long time to get over the disappointment, and I never have. Some years ago I published a paper in Nature on the French mathematician Galois, creator of modern topology. I sent it to Kaplansky and got back a post card: 'Dear Steiner, I have no regrets for doing a service to literature'!

It determined my career in the sense that the wish to live among scientists in the Institute for Advanced Studies and Princeton, and then at Churchill College Cambridge, arose from this deep shock and disappointment.

If I could just go back to Robert Redfield, because he is a folk hero in my discipline. You were lectured by him?

Yes!

Was he an interesting good lecturer?

No. No. The material was absolutely fascinating. For example, to learn what social anthropology is, I read Malinowsky, and a huge book by Myrdal called An

American Dilemma. I learned a great deal, but more from the reading than from Redfield.

And then comes one of my little autobiographies, called Errata. With good reason. Then comes a huge erratum. Harvard offers me a full scholarship. And little snob that I was - and it is pure snobbery - I took it, instead of staying at Chicago, where I was utterly happy and getting the best education. I tailed it off to Harvard, and fell into black depression. It was boring, snobbish, old fashioned. It was all that Chicago wasn't. And it was all due to what we call in Yiddish chutzpah. Arrogance.

I wrote to Hutchins, the Chancellor of Chicago, saying I have made a ghastly error. Will you give me one of your two nominations for trying for a Rhodes Scholarship from Illinois. He wrote back saying, very rightly, you should have thought of that before you left for Harvard. I wrote back saying I don't have a leg to stand on, but I think I can win it for you. My arrogance was limitless. Chicago had not won a Rhodes Scholarship for many years, being a non-athletic, out of the mainstream, university. So, amused by this arrogance, he let me have the nomination.

I won it, and was able to say to Harvard - good bye. And I headed for Oxford.

How long had you been at Harvard?

One dreadful year. Since then they have given me their highest academic honour, the Elliot Norton professorship of poetics. I have had every kind of Harvard guest lectureship. At the time I swore I would not put my feet in that place again! My relations with Harvard at the time could best be described by my dealing with the head of the English department. He was actually shaking with physical rage. He said 'One thing I can promise you, you will never get a teaching post in the United States'. Harvard regarded itself, which it still does, not only as primus inter pares, which it is, but as above any normal human law or aspiration. So with that curse upon me, off I went to Oxford.

4. Oxford University

So you are now how old?

Twenty.

When you started your work at Harvard, what was the theme of it?

At Harvard you could take an MA, which you could do in one year. I had some good courses in comparative literature, but I was working mainly in the Romantic period, which is what I hoped to do my D.Phil on at Oxford.

Which Romantics? The German or the English?

The English. I had begun work, which I carried on at Oxford, on why these great great writers, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, failed totally in the theatre. Why they tried over and over to write successful dramas and to break into the stage. And each time fiasco. I was very interested. Their poetry is full of drama and dramatic genius. What went wrong?

And now you come for the first time to England?

No, I was here for the Silver Jubilee of George V, sitting on someone's shoulders.

And what was your feeling arriving in Oxford?

A feeling of bewilderment. Not bewilderment at the physical toughness you needed to have. At Balliol we had a Scottish Master, Lindsay Kier, who believed that misery was the essential instrument of education. A very tenable view! So walking across the courtyard to take a shower. The worst years of rationing. The Shinwell Winter. There was no coal. Bread rations had been cut to below the wartime level. The smell of egg powder and whale steak will never leave me. You are rightly smiling, because you think that isn't the worst it could be!

I am smiling because I was in Oxford in the same years. I had just come back from India, and I can remember some of that. And then I realised that nobody was interested in English in a D.Phil. It was regarded as an American import. Very unwelcome. The idea of a prize fellow doing a D.Phil was completely out of the question. Today everybody elected to All Souls is told to get a D.Phil. Enormous difference. And there came Waterloo, or Philippi. My supervisor was a man called Hugo Dyson at Merton. You will have seen him in a film called *Darling* with Julie Christie. He plays the don. It was filmed in his magnificent rooms in Merton.

Hugo said to me, I am not the slightest bit interested in research, which is an American German invention. But I am an honest man. This is totally true and unbelievable. The fee is eight guineas a term for my supervision of you. I am not going to supervise you, but we will go and spend it either on a good dinner at The Bear in Woodstock, or at a play in London. Every penny will be spent on us two having a good and instructive evening. Just don't ask me to read your bloody nonsense. This is a completely true story.

The result was that when the viva came, under the presidency of a lady called Helen Gardner, later Dame Helen Gardner, the room was packed. Perhaps because I had begun publishing quite a bit in London - critical articles and essays. I had made a nuisance of myself. Dame Helen (right) said to me: 'Cricket may be the most boring and silly game on earth. But if you play it you have to learn the rules. Nobody forced you to go for a D.Phil. You have an immense future, but if you want a D.Phil you have to know what a correct textual note is, what a proper addition is, how one writes a footnote, boom, boom boom. It was a catastrophe.



She was absolutely right. But I was already having a wonderful job on the editorial staff of *The Economist*. I had won a competition to get the job at *The Economist*, to write editorials on foreign policy and on Anglo American relations. A lovely salary. A lovely room. I was envied beyond words by the successful D.Phil candidates. But it hurt terribly.

Who was the co-examiner?

A man from the University of Edinburgh, whom I have for Freudian reasons forgotten the name of. His sarcasm was justified, but hers was an open challenge. Hers was an instructive, didactic challenge.

So you were failed?

Completely. But already the book, which would be *The Death of Tragedy*, was more or less ready. It was lying in my drawer at *The Economist*.

5. The Economist

And one day - and I don't think you'll get a more curious story from any of your distinguished interlocutors - I was told there was someone from Oxford downstairs who would like to see me. In a coat down to the ground (he was a clergyman no longer in holy orders) and a huge black hat, he said: 'I am Humphry House (right) of Wadham. I am secretary of the Board of the English Faculty. Is it true that you had no supervision? Is it true that no one taught you what a D.Phil involves? That is a grave scandal. It is no compliment to you that you were too stupid to get help. But it is a grave dereliction. And if you want to be taught properly, and re-start the whole process, I will take you on. He was a great scholar. A great Dickens scholar.



And there followed the most wonderful experience. Geoffrey Crowther, my boss at The Economist (right), said the London Library is around the corner, and we will pay your membership. And you will have one day off a week to do your research. But we are keeping you on - we want you on The Economist. But if you want to do this - imagine the liberality of mind, the insight of the man. I worked my head off, but Humphry House died three days before my viva. But he knew already. Helen Gardner had told him. It was a congratulatory viva.



Had she told him?

Yes. Indeed she did. I had just been married, and I said to Zara, I've got it, but I don't want to be called Dr Steiner. So much for my insight into the future. But it did make my father happy; he had been very angry about the whole business.

I worshipped Humphry House. He was a dark, sad soul, but a scholar's scholar. And I learned what scholarship might really be about.

How long did it take you?

Over two years to re-do the whole thesis. But it was then Dr Steiner. And it became then *The Death of Tragedy*, the book.

Did you wait until you had re-done it?

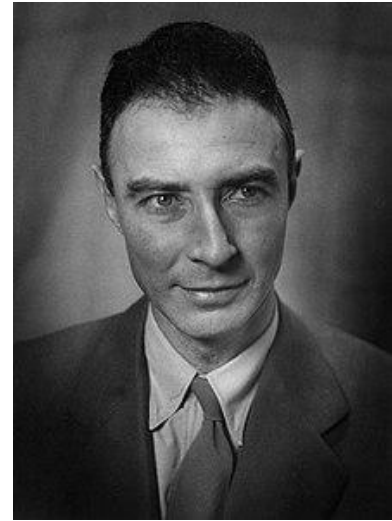
Yes, and thank God. Because if I had published, I could not have re-done the same subject.

And also the book would have been weaker?

Certainly, but certainly.

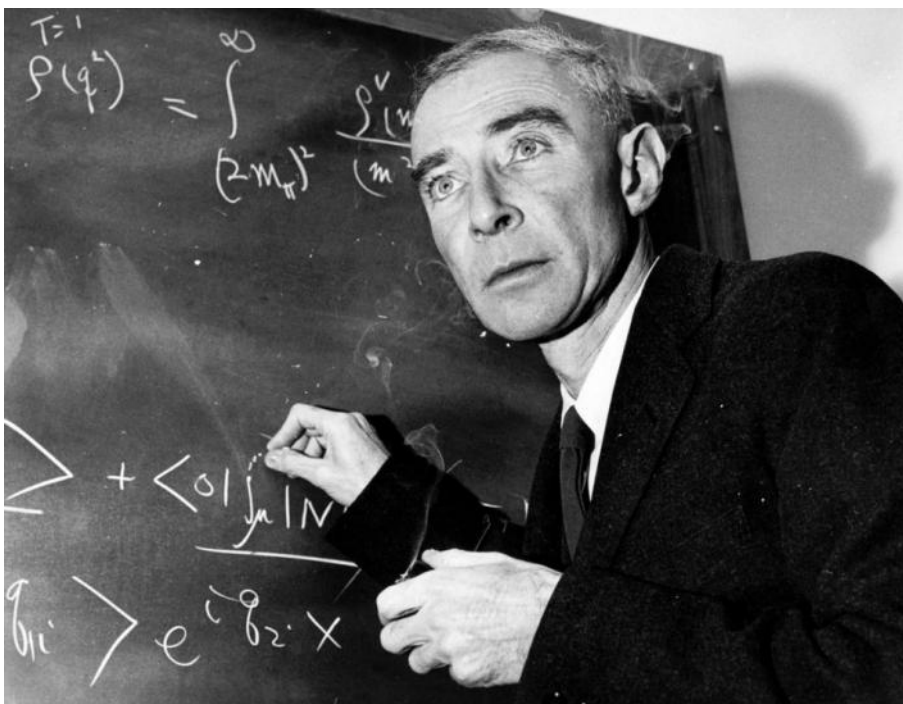
So how much longer did you stay with The Economist?

A good deal. Four wonderful years. And then came an assignment to go to the United States to cover the debate over the atomic energy act, and the founding of the Atomic Energy Commission. A perfectly normal assignment for a young journalist at The Economist. So I get an appointment - that was terribly difficult - with Oppenheimer at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton.



I go out on the little train, and I wait and wait, and I find him. And he says: 'I think I should make clear to you that I don't speak to journalists. And I said, but I did have an appointment. He said: 'I am sorry, that may be a misunderstanding. But I don't want you to waste your time completely. There is someone I would like you to meet, the great Plato scholar, Harold Cherniss. Cherniss (above) was very welcoming, very warm in his office.

He said let's have lunch. And the table was George Kennan, Cherniss, Panovsky, and one other. And instead of despising me, they were eager to know about The Economist. How do you produce it? Who decides the policy? They made me feel that I was the lucky visitor who could tell them. So Cherniss takes me back to his office. I have a strange guardian angel in my life. He is working on a Plato text where there are lacunae. He is trying to work on amendations.



Robert Oppenheimer.

Oppenheimer comes into the room, and does a thing which I think is unforgiveable. He sits behind us, which gives him every advantage. He curled up his long legs, takes out his famous pipe, and sat on a table behind us. He suddenly barked at me: 'Isn't it silly to try to fill blanks in a text? What is the use of that?'. Deliberate provocation. I was by that time so angry, and so pleased to be on The Economist, that I said 'I believe that is a silly remark Dr Oppenheimer'. I think that had never been said to him. And we went for each other. And suddenly his secretary came in and said to him: 'Dr Steiner's taxi is waiting'. I was going on to Washington on the train. And Oppenheimer said let's go to the taxi.

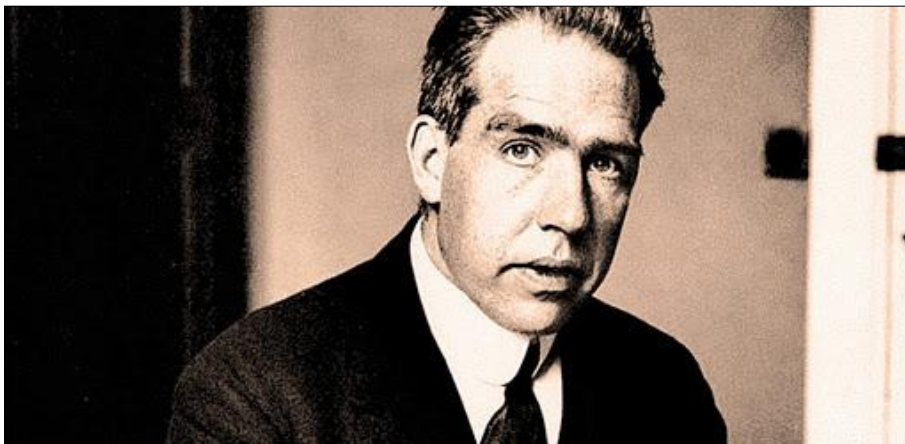
I thanked Cherniss for his hospitality. We walk out silently, and he suddenly says to me: 'Are you married?'. And I said yes. He said 'Any children?', and I said no. And he said 'That will make housing easier'.

That is a totally true story. And that is how I was elected, as the first young person in arts at the Institute of Advanced Study. An experiment. Big footnote. I should have said let me think it over. I should have got in touch with my bosses at The Economist and said what do you think of this offer. I didn't. I took it on the spot. I was out of my mind with pride. The Institute of Advanced Study - Einstein's house, Godel's house, Panovsky's house.

The Economist said you've made a big mistake. But if you ever want to come back we will always want you. Which was incredibly generous. But it was a different time. A time of elite generosity. Elite gentility.

6. Institute of Advanced Study

So my wife and I arrive one morning at Princeton. We were asked to come to lunch in the cafeteria. And we stand there and literally could not move. How do you enter a lunch room where the world's giants are sitting or taking their trays?



Niels Bohr.

I think we were shaking physically. And suddenly Niels Bohr comes over and says: 'Welcome, welcome, sit with me'. So we sit down, feeling unable to say a word. Niels Bohr realises this, and pulls out of his ancient Danish waistcoat a photograph: 'My twelve grandchildren - and I know all their names!'. And within minutes this prince of princes put us at ease. He said relax, relax, you are one of us. Andre Weil, one of the world's greatest algebraists, said quietly to me: 'We will not have much to say to each other, but one thing I want you to get in your head. People with brains do algebraic topology theory and number theory. People with lesser brains, like I Andre Weil, do group theory. The rest is garbage (l'ordure in French)'. That was my welcome from him.

Many were welcoming, many were not. Because it was an Oppenheimer decision, an Oppenheimer experiment, and there was not guarantee at all that it would work. I had two magnificent years there, and out of that came further work, and the decision that, even if he asked me to stay (and he wouldn't have, it was a two year appointment) that I should move on. It was so unreal, and you were not allowed to teach. And it would be difficult to describe to you the Byzantine atmosphere; there is no other way to put it. Oppenheimer had special envelopes made - as I am not a great novelist I cannot invent this - for the monthly cheque, which would not make noise when slipped under the door. That was the atmosphere at the Institute.

At the end of my second year, Oppenheimer came in. He said: 'I understand you want to go back to Europe'. I said: 'By rowboat if necessary'. He said, there is a man who wants to see you in my office. He was Sir John Cockcroft, who had cracked the atom and was the first Master of something that didn't exist called Churchill College. He said: 'We are looking for a Director of Studies in the arts, with a science background. The list is small'. A very British put down! And that is how I came to a muddy field full of water, with blueprints which I couldn't read of course, to see the beginning of Churchill College.

Can we just to back to the Institute for a moment? You mentioned two or three of the amazing people waiting in that queue as you got your lunch. Were there any others who you particularly befriended?

The great historian Kanterovic. De Tornai, the Michaelangelo man. The whole department of ancient Greek and Latin. I had come just after von Neumann. Godel, who has changed everything. Do you know what his citation was for his Harvard honorary degree? 'The greatest step in human thought since Descartes'. One of the few deeply personal things Oppenheimer ever said to me was: 'You may think you have been made welcome in the house of Einstein. You have been made welcome in the house of Godel'. Probably true. Einstein himself often thought Godel had changed all human thought, at the age of 24.

7. Cambridge University

So now I am in Cambridge, at Churchill, and the fun of starting a place was immense. The sheer fun. We had nissen huts in which to teach, with the water coming in. We started a number of revolutionary things, like overseas Fellows. We had brilliant people from America. There were three students in English, who had come desperately, having been unable to get into any proper college!

It was an enormously exciting adventure. But from the start I knew it wouldn't work. I had come, and Cockcroft had agreed, that this was an opportunity to start new fields. That we should have linguistics - there were none at Cambridge. That we should have comparative literature - there was none. There were all sorts of hopes. The people who made me really warmly welcome were Richard Keynes, Richard Adrian, Martin Wells. The high princes of Cambridge intellectuality. Fellows of Trinity or Peterhouse to a man, who had come to join the new College - with the one ambition to have as many firsts as Trinity. They didn't disguise this. I thought that was a most petty ambition for a new national college - which had funds, and didn't owe anything to Cambridge. They saw it very differently. So there was a warm happy misunderstanding in a sense, from the start.

When I started lecturing, they had to move me to the largest lecture theatre in Cambridge, the Lady Mitchell Hall. It was standing room only. You can imagine how excited the students were to hear lectures on how to read a poem after Marx, Freud and Levi-Strauss. I taught as a seminar: What is Translation?. I had more applications to do doctorates than anyone else in the English faculty. This was going to be punished and punished hard.

As a fellow of a College you were entitled to apply for an Assistant Lectureship. Which I did. There was the famous interview, which has been often described, and has become legendary. Muriel Bradbrook, in full gown. I think you know the story. There was a copy of an article by me in Encounter in front of them. I had written in the article 'To shoot a man, because you disagree with him about Hegel's dialectic, is a compliment to the human spirit'. Muriel Bradbrook (right) asked: 'Did you write this?'. I said yes. She said 'Do you believe it?'. I said yes. That was the end of an offer of an Assistant Lectureship. And the end of the interview.



Whereupon, in its chivalric generosity, Churchill said we don't give a damn about your having an assistant lectureship. Lecture in our dining hall (which is one of the biggest in Cambridge). Go on supervising. We will pay you a professorial fellowship. What Downing College was doing for Leavis, who also didn't have a lectureship at that point. An exact parallel.

I thought about it. I loved Churchill College. I loved Cambridge. My wife was already teaching. But the students of Leavis paid a terrible price. As Leavis couldn't examine, nor be a member of the Board that set the Tripos, they paid a terrible

price. They paid for his genius. And then he went to York as you know. So, for the sake of the students, I turned that offer down. I wasn't going to play the Leavis game.

There followed some very very hard years. Two young children, No Cambridge job. A tiny college stipend. So I began earning my living by freelance writing and guest lecturing. It meant being away a great deal. And my father was already very ill. He suffered from Hodgkin's Disease. He asked me to his favourite dining table in New York, at the hotel where he always had me for dinner. I told him I had been offered chairs in comparative literature at Chicago, and I think it was Yale or Columbia. I asked him which I should choose. He said only you can decide, but if you do this, Hitler will have won. He meant there wouldn't be any Steiner left in Europe.

I phoned my wife that night, and said rather than that contempt I would sell shoe laces. I agreed with my father. Indeed Hitler would have won.

Were there no other Steiners?

He meant of our immediate family. On the memorial tablets in Prague there are about thirty members of our family, who were gassed. So my father meant it in a very deep sense.

It was very rough. There was a wonderful university at Santa Barbara. A dream place. I was there in 1964 to give a lecture. The phone rang, and it was the University of Geneva. They explained that during the Risorgimento, under Cavour, there was founded the first chair of comparative literature, anywhere in the world. They explained that funds had been gathered to re-start the chair, and they wanted to offer it to me.

8. University of Geneva

Did you ask your father again about this?

He was so happy. He later dies in Zurich. My other also died later in Switzerland. Switzerland became decisive in my personal life, and much more in my professional life. I was able to use all my languages. My rule was to teach the text, so far as possible, in the language of the text.

We had already bought a house in Cambridge, and my wife decided to stay in Cambridge. She was already teaching at New Hall, where she became Vice President. And her subject was the history of English international relations - and all her materials were here. But also something that rather haunts me. She is incredibly intelligent and gifted, and totally monoglot. Which is the irony of our marriage! Chomsky cannot say yes or no in another language. He too is a total monoglot.

Big footnote. If I were a great psychological scientist, I would be working on the following problem. What is the organic block that stops people learning another language?. There is no correlation with intelligence. You can find waiters who will speak ten languages effortlessly.

How long were you in Geneva?

Twenty five years. I arranged a seven months a year schedule. Seven months in Geneva, five months in Cambridge.

Did you find it a good place to teach? Were the students good?

Not as good as they would have been at Cambridge or Harvard, Very mixed. But at the graduate level absolutely international. And the city itself, in which four or five languages are current, is perfect for comparative literature. Tailor made for that kind of vision of literature. And the centre of Europe. At the weekend I would be in Milan, down the road, through the tunnel. I would be in Paris. I would be in Munich constantly. Teaching, lecturing. It is a central point. There wasn't the Eurostar. Britain was even more insular than it is today. From a place like Geneva you could live Europe, which is what I wanted to do.

Did you keep up your contacts with Churchill at all?

Most definitely. They insisted, and most generously made me an extraordinary Fellow, and then a pensioner Fellow, so I'm there for ever.

Did you teach at all at Churchill?

No never. But life is so full of ironies. Two years after kicking me out, The English faculty put gobbets, as they call them, extracts from The Death of Tragedy, on the Tripos paper. Two years after asking me to leave!

Were you close to Leavis?

No. But I know his wife well. Bulstrode Gardens was through the hedge from Churchill College. She would supervise Churchill students. She would take someone who was expected to get a Third, and coax them into a 2.2 or a 2.1. She

was a fabulous pedagogic force. She had a burning puritanical conviction that all students must be given the very best of intellectual challenges. And when she invited me to 12 Bulstrode Gardens to talk about the papers, her shy little husband would bring in the tea!

When did you leave the University of Geneva?

In Switzerland the law is absolute. You are retired at 65.

9. Reflections

Since then have you taken on any career moves?

I have been lecturing, pretty much all over the place, but no formal regular teaching.

What do you mainly lecture on?

An embarrassing range of subjects and passions. Very recently, for example, I went to the University of Milan, and there I was lecturing on certain very intriguing moments in Plato, and how they have influenced political theory, poetics, and classical scholarship itself. I then went on to Turin, one of my favourite cities. That was lots of fun. I did a lecture on one line in Dante's *Commedia*, where Neptune, the God of the Sea, is sitting at the bottom of the sea. He looks up and he sees the shadow of the great ship *Argo*, with Jason on it, passing overhead. It is a totally magical and fantastic line. And I asked the question of the very large audience: 'What do you do after Cousteau?'

Today seeing a ship pass over your head when you are under the sea is a commonplace experience for snorkel divers, and deep sea divers. This has completely changed the quality of shock. The quality of shock, was so surrealist for Dante, And then I went through some of the surrealists. The point of the lecture was how do our readings change with the changing of our lives. Then I went on to Genoa. Genoa has a combined lectureship sponsored by the City, the Government, and Genoese business associations which in Italy are very powerful. They wanted to know whether I see any hopes for European union. That is very important for a harbour city such as Genoa. So that was a completely different register of interests.

My lecture subjects depend very much on what my hosts are interested in. My next trips are in October. I am going to lecture in Barcelona. They I am presiding over a big international conference, which I have planned, in Lisbon. Our question there is: 'Has science reached certain limits, certain frontiers?'. I will be chairing, and there are some very great scientists coming, who will debate this.

At Genoa, what was your thinking about the future of Europe?

I am extremely sceptical about any future for Europe. I think the turning point was the complete failure of Europe to deal with what was a minor crisis in Kosovo, and its desperate pleas to the USA to get it out of its mess. I think that marked the end of many utopian views about European unity. I think there are two tasks left for today's Europe. Two effective duties, or tasks, or hopes.

One is to find out how different ethnic groups, cultures, religions, can co-exist without in fact assimilating them. That is the biggest problem. These large migrant communities will not be assimilated, but we must try to work out peaceful and collaborative methods of co-existence. I emphasise this when I lecture in Spain, because of the great period of early medieval co-existence in Spain between Islam and Christianity.

The other is that the young people in Europe have never been so hopeless, so without hope, so without any sense of an ideology. No sense of any political or

utopian future. Remember that if you don't commit any great creative mistakes when you are young, the rest of your life is largely wasted.

What were the great mistakes? Marxism, of course, for generations. Fascism was a great mistake. Zionism was a great mistake. There were many wonderful mistakes you could make. If disillusion came later with maturity, you had at least lived the essential passion which should be the life of the young. There is nothing like that today. Nobody is going to die for a hedge fund. Nobody is going to die for the enormous entertainment industries, for the mass media, for athletic worship. Can we again find for the young things worth being wrong about? But wrong about in a creative and passionate way.

Those I think are the two tasks, and they are very very difficult.

Do you have any suggestions on the second?

Until there is again an effective left in Europe we are not going to get going. That is to say that since 1789 and the French Revolution, hope has always been on the left. Hope is now fully homeless in Europe. We can't go back to any of the traditional left ideas. They have turned out not only to be economically erroneous, but they lead to the gulag. Did this have to be? Are there modes of radical socialism? Are there modes of the famous third way that we have simply let go in the enormous waves of money that have poured over Europe?

If we re-enter a period of economic stress, and I think we will, and the collapse of certain vast luxury structures, I think there is a chance that a new form of left may evolve. But my age is such that I am not very well qualified. I would like to know what the dreams of those young people are, who are turning down city careers. They are not numerous. Certain movements command tremendous respect in my opinion. The French *Médecins Sans Frontières*, the various volunteer overseas movements. There are young people passionately committed to helping others.

If you were to ask me have there been islands of hope, of light, I would say yes. I would like to name a few.

In no previous civilisation has been worried about ecology. We know we are on a small ransacked planet, and there isn't much time left for human beings to do something about it. Certainly we are beginning to care for animals, as never before. As we do this interview the papers are full of people in flooded parts of Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire saving animals at any price. Not only pets. The sense that we owe to animals all possible care. The hate of cruelty towards animals. This is very new. There are tiny signs of it in the late Victorian period, but hardly before then. And the third and biggest is the belief that children deserve protection and care. The idea that the economic and sexual exploitation of children makes a society deeply suspect is fairly new. The wish to protect children, to give all children the chance of a decent life. These are the rough elements, the magma you might say, of what could become a new humanism.

*Very interesting. Can we now go back over your writings a little bit. Could you distil the essence of your D.Phil, which was turned into the book *The Death of Tragedy*?*

Yes, this was a question which had been asked before. Why do great tragedies end roughly after the age of Racine? Why is tragedy an archaic literary form? Why is it essentially part of the museum of the past? This was just before absurdist drama brought forward its own parodistic version of the past. You could argue that the *The Homecoming* of Pinter is a fantastically intelligent meditation on *Lear*. This is not tragedy in the traditional sense. So I developed I think the commonsense thesis that tragedy is tied into a sense of divine intervention into human affairs, of divine enmity to man. Notions that had lost their strength after the mid eighteenth century. I did not believe the, and still do not believe, that you can have an agnostic, secular tragedy.

And they've lost their strength because of the scientific revolution, and Descartes?

Every change in industrial and technical life. Modernity. Modernity is in essence agnostic.

What is modernity?

Modernity is the belief that we do not need God's help, and that God will not come down and punish us if we get something wrong. It is man's loneliness in a practical world.

So do you subscribe to the Weberian thesis of the disenchantment?

Very much so. The de-mythologising. But what he did not foresee was the kitsch mythology such as those of pop and sport, and the modern media. A phenomenon such as J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter* or the *Simpson Family* which is opening in one hundred thousand cinemas at midnight tomorrow. Great substitute mythologies. Infantile mythologies. This Weber did not foresee.

And he did not foresee the resurgence of fundamentalist religion?

Yes. There are an estimate 40 million fundamentalists in the southern and south eastern United States. And a figure which came out recently and keeps haunting me. There are an estimate 20 million American adults who are quite convinced that Elvis Presley has risen from the dead.

And what is your theory for the resurgence of this fundamentalism?

Oh surely this is one for you yourself, as a social anthropologist. Surely it is the terrible loneliness of modern life. The wish for supernatural agency to give hope is constant. The classic text there is from a man I do not otherwise care for very much - Carl Jung. In a wonderful little text just after the war, Jung says roughly. We have been left in a horrible state. Everything is destroyed. Very soon people will be seeing flying objects, and hoping and praying for extra-terrestrial investigations of the earth, with a possible view to taking care of us. This comes before the great big UFO wave, which he completely predicted.

And in T.S.Eliot's Four Quartets he talks about the surge of telling fortunes in tea cups in a time of stress and anxiety.

Of course astrology is very widespread at present. There are in the USA three times more registered astrologists than chemists and physicists. There are all over London

very wealthy people who build their flats according to mystical oriental arrangements. The wife of our recent prime minister Tony Blair wears an amulet against space rays, and consults various charlatans of new age persuasions. A kind of cheap madness is everywhere around us.

You said that Carl Jung was not normally your favourite author. But who are your favourite authors?

Let me come back to Jung, because I have an interesting problem there. I completely reject psychoanalysis for all sorts of reasons, but I worship Freud. One of the great mythmakers, with Marx, of all time. In Freud I see a deep, stern, human decency. But Freud understood next to nothing about poetic creation. He wrote a notorious piece about poet as daydreamer. He argued that when you grow up you get over this thing called poetry. He had virtually no ear for music. And his writings on art, on Michaelangelo and Leonardo, are among his least persuasive.

Jung has a formidable insight into poetic creation. Jung puts the process of poesis, of shaping creation, at the centre of the psyche. He knows about symbolism and he knows about allegory. He has a terrific feel for the still mysterious psychic and cerebral processes of creation. So anyone concerned with aesthetic creation will be looking to Jung and not to Freud.

Coming back to authors, which two or three do you think have most influenced you?

I couldn't begin to deal with that. I am brought up on Homer, from about the age of five. Homer was read to me by my father. I still regard some things in Homer as unsurpassed. I will give an example, because I am lecturing on that very point in Venice in October. In the last book of the Iliad, book 24, King Priam comes to plead for the body of his slain son Hector. I know of no other text, in any literature, that reaches one or two of the summits of that text. For example when the old man puts his lips on the man slaughtering hand of Achilles. But then comes the utter climax. They weep. Achilles weeps for his own father, and because Achilles knows he will soon die himself in battle. Priam weeps because he knows that his city of Troy will soon be razed to the ground, and burned to ashes with all his fifty sons.

And in that moment Achilles quietly turns to Priam and says 'Now we have to eat, whatever our grief'. Neither Shakespeare nor the Bible would have dared that line. The only one who could have coped with it would have been Tolstoy, who was steeped in Homer. Think of that line. The example that Achilles gives, very quietly, is another mythological figure, Niobe, whose ten children were killed in vengeance by Apollo and Diana, and the line is very simple - she fell to her food. That is the best translation that we have, to try to make it very concrete. There is no cynicism in that line. There is no false modernist objectivity. It's a kind of transcendently understanding of what human life is, in the final analysis.

No other text quite matches. Other than moments in the Odyssey, which I have spent my whole life working on and dealing with. I then of course turn to Shakespeare, which everyone does, and which accompanies me every day. But in the final analysis I know why Eliot prefers Dante to Shakespeare. This has nothing to do with comparative merit - that would be idiotic. It is that Dante's philosophic, intellectual grandeur, his passion for the life of the mind, his sense of how ideas

work, and how ideas become animate forces, far transcends that of Shakespeare. I can't do at any point without Dante, and without the belief that finally the greatest poetry and the greatest intellectual understanding go together.

When you were talking and the depth of understanding of humans in Homer, I was thinking of King Lear on the heath.

But sorry, I have real trouble with that one. At one level I have trouble with the leap off the cliff. At what level of absurdity are we meant to take that? The parody scenes in the hut with the fool. They are fantastic, surrealistic. They are a kind of metaphysical circus like no one else has every achieved. I cannot identify with them. I can completely identify with Achilles let's have dinner. I can identify with the dog Argo, raising his head to greet Ulysses when her returns after twenty years. He lets his head be stroked, and he dies in that moment. He has waited for him. He has recognised him. There are a thousand points in Home which invite me to be more human. The Shakespearean case is much more complicated. There is another curious point, which arises from my French education. I plead guilty. You can cut vast chunks of Shakespeare. Everybody does. We haven't seen a complete production of Hamlet in thirty or forty years. It was done in this country, only because the Russians, with pedagogic completeness, have not cut a single line out of their Hamlet. It is almost five hours. You can cut big chunks from Shakespeare, and it is still transcendently marvellous.

But you cannot cut a single line out of Dante, or Racine, or Homer. I was brought up in a classical aesthetic, where the totality of willed creation is paramount. Shakespeare is a script writer. There has never been another like him on the face of the earth. Today he would write television scripts with delight, and with virtuoso skill. But they are scripts. Not the sonnets, which everyone likes to talk about and nobody reads. But the plays are in motion. They are open-ended scripts. They are subject to production, to direction, to social context. Not certain of these other classics, which in my French Lycee education were the ideal criterion.

Coming to poets, were any of the Romantics influential on you?

I hold the heretical belief that Keats' letters are incomparable. If we had the letters of a young Shakespeare, they would be like the letters of Keats. Shelley you have to do in selected bits. I don't buy Leavis' condemnation, but I know why he made it. Coleridge I am enveloped in. But it is also the Coleridge of political theory, religion, metaphysics. In late life Wordsworth has come to mean more and more to me. I think Wordsworth, in his epic structure, is a poet for the ages.

*To go back to your own writing, what was your next book after *The Death of Tragedy*?*

I had already been working on a book on Tolstoy. That hammered out an immature unripe persuasion that very great literature depended on the question of God being important. Not to believe in God. But the question of whether there is a God is central to great art. The God question is ubiquitous in Russian literature. The perfectly routine question is: ask a person which of the two he prefers, Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, and you have a shorthand portrait of that person.

What about more recent writers?

Proust accompanies me at every point. I distrust most Joyceans. I have worked my way through *Ulysses*, with endless admiration, and being very moved. But *Finnegan's Wake* is bluff, in my opinion, as are those who claim to have read it. They have not.

For 26 years I was the senior literary critic on the *New Yorker*. Modern fiction poured across my desk. I knew that Nabokov was Nabokov from the word go. A master. The great Yeats poems are like no others. There is much that is lush and self-indulgent, but the great Yeats is incomparable.

Coming back to poetic creation, do you have any views about the sources and springs of poetic creation?

Sometimes by accident. Thomas Nash, a contemporary of Shakespeare, an envious rival, wrote about great women of history. He wrote that when Helen of Troy went grey, 'brightness fell from her hair'. The printer misread the manuscript and printed 'brightness fell from the air'. Regarded as one of Nash's great lines of poetry, it was a printer's error!

Plato, who says everything, says that a metaphor is two areas of the human brain brought into unexpected contact. There it is! When you think of a word, the brain conjures up a field of association, of words which may in some way link with it - like the overtones and undertones in a musical score. Shakespeare seems to feel around every word the totality of possible linguistic usages. Of what makes that possible, we know next to nothing. I hope this will remain enigmatic.

*Do you know the *Road to Xanadu*, by Livingstone Lowes?*

Yes. He was a Harvard professor. An immense presence. He wrote of the associations in Coleridge's mind, where all the images originate. It would be interesting to know all the things that Coleridge read, and where these associations came from. But this approach doesn't take us very far. It doesn't tell you why everybody else could read the same books, and nothing would happen. This is the puzzle.

In the primary school in Berne, the teacher on a school expedition took the little ones to look at an aqueduct. They trotted out to look at the beautiful Roman aqueduct near Berne. She said, do your best to draw it. One child put shoes on the pillars of the aqueduct. And every aqueduct has been walking since. He was called Paul Klee. And luckily the teacher knew, in that moment, what she was looking at. No human being had ever put shoes on the pillars of an aqueduct. How does that happen in a six year old? We have no clue. Hurrah for having no clue!

Have you yourself written much poetry?

Embarrassingly, yes. Because in French education writing verse was part of the discipline. In the baccalaureate you even wrote Latin verse. Writing verse was part of the skill set of an Edwardian gentleman in England. I published some of my own verse at Oxford. One day I woke up to the realisation that verse is not a lesser form

of poetry. It is the opposite of poetry, the denial of poetry. I also started drawing and painting a great deal. It may have been a mistake to stop.

And what about music?

In my time music meant learning the piano, and my handicap made that impossible. So I was spared that humiliation! But of course music is constant and indispensable.

Which composers?

All music from every period. It seems to me that there is nothing in music which is not worth learning about. As a mark of age, I find myself turning to Haydn chamber music. It conveys a gift of peace, of calm acceptance, of forgiveness, which I find almost nowhere else.

Handel?

No, I am not a Handelian. He is a rich man's Elgar. I find much of Handel, particularly the operas, monotonous.

You started off with your family background, and your relationship to God. You have mentioned him a number of times. Do you ask the question about God?

I won't go into this. In so far as I can put it into language, it will be covered by a book I am publishing in January.

Can we know the title of the book?

Yes, I'll gladly tell you about it. It's called *My Unwritten Books*. It is seven chapters, on seven books I have not written. I try to explain in each case the inhibition that prevented me writing the book.

Can you give us some examples?

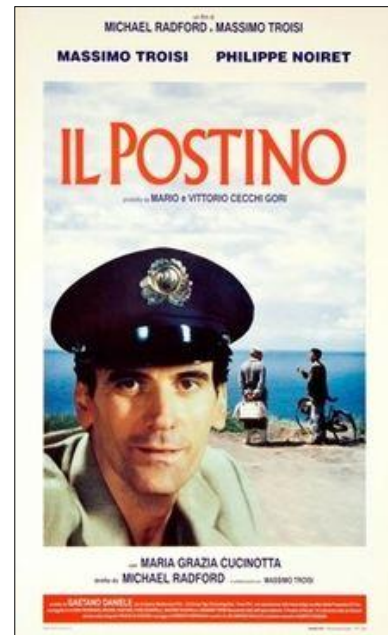
Yes. One is my confession that some of us love animals more than human beings. It is the history of our life with our four English sheepdogs. The last chapter is on my political and religious positions. One chapter is called *Zion*. Several times in my life there was the obvious chance to move to Jerusalem. My father was a member of the original Zionist association in Vienna, when he was a young man. One is the only time I have written erotica in my life. It is about making love in different languages. So each chapter is a book which I tried to write, and I explain why I failed.

Are there other things I should have asked you?

The question you have been too kind to ask is what is it like to spend your life among alpha people - at the Institute of Advanced Study, here at the high table. The ones who change our lives, who create things. To have had, for a time, Crick and Watson as colleagues. And to know that one's own skills, as commentator, teacher, explainer, a propagandist for quality, a critic, are eternally doomed to being Beta++. To know this clearly, to know it when you get up in the morning. To know exactly where the light years of difference lie, and that there can be no bluff.

Certainly great criticism can move into the field of creation. Usually by great creators - Eliott, Coleridge. The task of teacher is immensely important. Achieving

the transmission. The privilege, as I put it, of carrying the mail. There is that wonderful film, *Il Postino*, in which Neruda gives his poems to the mailman to be posted. I am incredibly lucky and privileged to be the mailman. And a number of times I have helped work to break through. When I published I think the first essay in English on Paul Celan, the greatest German poet since Rilke, the *Times Literary Supplement* very kindly asked me how do you spell him. Because the name had never been heard. Now he is renowned worldwide. To have helped the real thing break through. My God, how lucky I am! But it will never fool me as to the essential second-ratedness of one's job. To be an academic, a commentator, is to be a happy parasite. If one could somehow imagine a happy parasite! The man who could do that would be Edward Lear. He could draw a happy parasite! That's how I think of it.



Is this the Salieri complex?

Yes, if you like. But it is much older than that. What was it like to have lunch next to Dante? It is part of the human condition. The alpha are very very few, and they are different from us. Those who are electric with the step into the unknown are different from us. Often it is luck. Linus Pauling, whom I have met, was two weeks away from the DNA breakthrough, as we know. He already had two Nobel Prizes. Think of that. Wallis and Darwin.

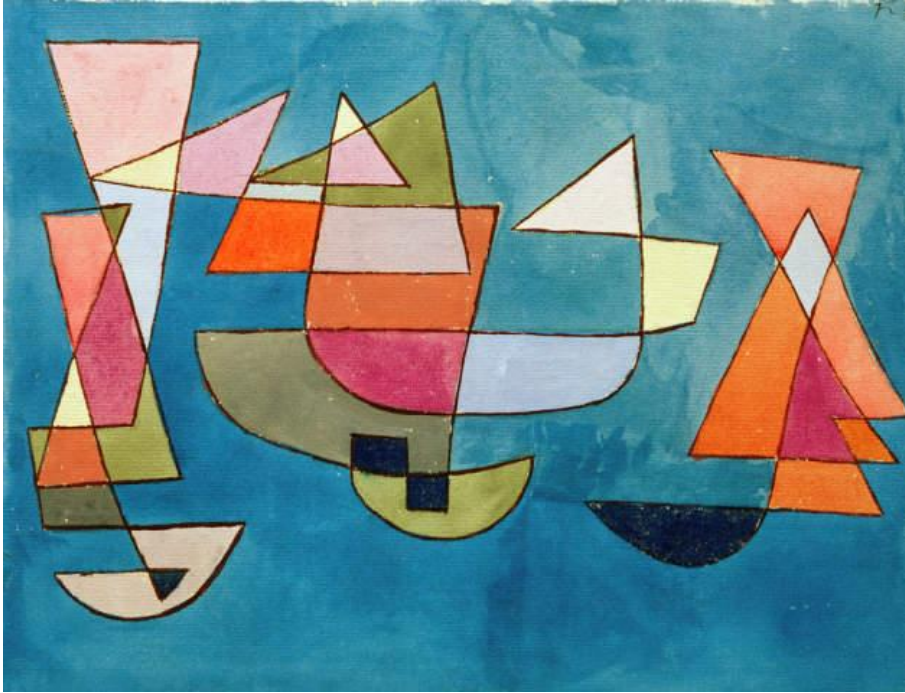
So many cases. Not probably in the arts, where nobody else can be Schumann, or Schubert, or Chopin. There is one. But around them are many sustaining forces, there is no doubt. The sociology of the greatest artists is complex. One night, fed up with his bullying father, Kafka sits up all night (he was a great insomniac) and writes his first great story, *The Insomniac*. Which contains just about the whole of modern literature. And that's what it's all about. And if I can get people to be as excited about it, to read it, to try to understand it. If I can get the people around our table, as I did in our seminar in Geneva, to learn by heart some of the poetry I love, I've been incredibly lucky, incredibly lucky.

Do you know any literary critic who you would say is right up there?

No, because the business of criticism is of itself secondary. There are very major critics who played a very great role in the history of culture. Matthew Arnold, Leavis, Edmund Wilson, But it is secondary. If Edmund Wilson had not written about Joyce, Hemingway, somebody else would have. It is a distributive function, not an autonomously singular function.

You don't need consolation, but your work has changed peoples' lives.

That's why I keep saying I am lucky. But it's not the same thing. Please bear in mind 'brightness falls from the air'. Nobody else can have that. It's incredibly unfair. Why has God, or I prefer to think the Devil, been so clubby and so unjust in his distribution of great gifts? At six years old one is Paul Klee. Or one isn't. Reflect on that example of the walking aqueduct. Reflect on the complexity, or the divine simplicity, of a child's discovery. And you can't fake that. That's the wonderful thing. You can't bluff real creation.



Sailing Boats by Paul Klee.
