

THE DEFINING MYSTERY

Language and Silence, Essays 1958-1966. By George Steiner. Faber. 50s.

There are thirty-one essays in this book, presented in six groups. Four of the groups are primarily occasional in character— essays on specific personalities (e.g. Leavis, Lévi-Strauss, McLuhan, Kafka) or events (e.g. Shakespeare's quatercentenary, or the publication of the New English Bible) —though Steiner throughout emphasises the universal implications of a topic, relating everything and everyone to the spirit of the age, or to some underlying cultural pattern. The other groups, headed "Humane Literacy" and "Marxism and Literature," however, explicitly develop general themes which underlie all of Steiner's writing, and consequently I shall concentrate on them here.

Steiner himself is quite clear about the unity underlying his essays. "Primarily," the preface says, "this is a book about language : about language and politics, language and the future of literature, about the pressures on language of totalitarian lies and cultural decay, about language and other codes of meaning (music, translation, mathematics), about language and silence." And this is certainly the case. He is preoccupied with the place language has in society, with the relationship between language, thought, reality and culture. Language, for him, is "the defining mystery of man "; in it, "his identity and historical presence -are uniquely explicit" (17). There are really two sides to Steiner's preoccupation : first, he is worried about the present state of language; second, he wants to do something about it. He is worried because he sees the province of language, as a medium of effective communication, being encroached upon by other, powerful forces. There are the hyperstringent forms of mathematical and logical expression; there are pressures from the other "modes of statement" which border on language—light, music and silence; there is the waste of language, especially through the excessive outpourings of

(largely) academic literary critics who, instead of guiding the development of our powers of literary discrimination in an interesting and responsible way, tend to develop an "inhumane" literacy; and, perhaps most of all, there are the "bestialities" of totalitarian regimes—for Steiner it is essential that any attempt to establish our present position of (linguistic) consciousness should be linked with the barbarism of Nazism and Stalinism, and the juxtaposition of the inhuman and the humane which that central European (and literate) civilisation was able to produce simultaneously. Steiner further believes that language is no longer relevant to all major modes of action, thought and sensibility (see "The retreat from the word"). He is anxious that poets should exercise their important function of safeguarding the vital force of speech (see "Silence and the poet"), and that people should learn foreign languages, if only to be aware of the limitations of their own.

Steiner suggests that if any remedy exists at all, it can only lie in more careful attention being paid to "the life of language," to "the complex energies of the word in our society and culture" (13). His aim is not literary criticism, but rather—"a philosophy of language," which he feels is prerequisite for a real understanding of society. Such a philosophy would derive from a number of sources—from the study of literary communication in particular (seen within the perspective of communication as a whole), but also from anthropology, philosophy and linguistics. This is the aim, but Steiner does not succeed in it. His observations about language are too unconnected, vague and frequently wrong to provide much basis for anything as systematic as a philosophy. The main objection a linguist would have to Steiner's approach is his facile animism. He believes that "languages are living organisms" that "have in them a certain life force, and certain powers of absorption and growth." This is quite a popular notion, but it is rarely argued these days at quite such an intellectual level. One finds a fallacy of this kind in Schlegel and other nineteenth-century Darwinian-influenced philologists, but no longer. No-one would of

course deny that language has a powerful role in expressing, reflecting and codifying a culture, and that in order to understand a culture one must also deeply understand the language. But codifying traditions of behaviour is one thing; actually identifying language with the sensibilities of a culture is another. Even Benjamin Lee Whorf, who came closest to this view, would have been most upset. "Everything forgets. But not a language," says Steiner (131). Really ! This is personification asking to be taken literally. Language has no independent existence of its own, and it certainly cannot pre-empt human functions. The life force, the sensibility of a culture belongs to the users of a language, and not to the medium, the tool. To confuse the two may lead to powerful rhetoric for a while, but the end-product is unconvincing (cf. his identification of the German language and spirit in his controversial "The hollow miracle," for example).

Steiner's " philosophy " is also weakened by vagueness. I do not know what he means by the " polyphonic " structure of language (232); the frequently-cited " cadence " of a language; the "sinew of verb and strong solemnities," which was evidently characteristic of late sixteenth-century English prose; or the "flat and diminished state" which present-day English is supposed to be in. Nor do I understand his language for discussing style (which is a crucial concept for Steiner, being the major criterion of a critic's permanence) : Tyndale has a "spare and sinewy" style; he admires the "scruple and modesty" of Mayer's. It would be nice to know what Steiner thinks of the claims of recent linguistic work in stylistics.

None of this is to deny Steiner's breadth of (at times prophetic) vision, the value of his wide reading (cf. the twenty-six pages of Index), his acute perception of central themes in cultural situations, the stimulus his work undoubtedly is to researchers through his comparative perspective in literature, the power and sincerity of his writing. But the end-product is a collection of important

and fascinating reflections; not yet a philosophy.

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