

Thoughts Out of Season

Occasional Reviews & Notes
Of Mutual Interest
Compiled by Tim & Terry Forward



George Steiner¹ (1929 – 2020)

(a person sneezes)

“God bless you!”

WE SPEAK STILL 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. They raggle about like old rags of ghosts in the attic.

This is the reason why rational men and women, particularly in the scientific and technological realities of the West, still refer to ‘God’. This is why the postulate of the existence of God persists in so many unconsidered turns of phrase and allusion. No plausible reflection or belief underwrites His presence. Nor does any intelligible evidence. Where God clings to our culture, to our routines of discourse, He is a phantom of grammar, a fossil embedded in the childhood of rational speech. So Nietzsche (and many after him).

This essay argues the reverse.

¹ **Francis George Steiner** was a Franco-American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, and educator. He wrote extensively about the relationship between language, literature and society, and the impact of the Holocaust.

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It proposes that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence. I will put forward the argument that the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular that of literature, of the arts, of musical form, [OK, Tim, suspension bridges, too.] infers the necessary possibility of this real presence. The seeming paradox of a 'necessary possibility'² is, very precisely, that which the poem, the painting, the musical composition are at liberty to explore and to enact.

This study will contend that the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the test and work of art or music, which is to say when we encounter the *other* in its condition of freedom, it is a wager on transcendence.

This wager – it is that of Descartes, of Kant and of every poet, artist composer of whom we have explicit record - predicates the presence of a realness, of a 'substantiation' (the theological reach of this word is obvious³) within language and form. It supposes a passage, beyond the fictive⁴ or purely pragmatic, form meaning to meaningfulness. The conjecture that 'God' is, not because our grammar is outworn; but that the grammar lives and generates worlds because there is a wager on God.

Such a conjecture may, wherever it has been or is put forward, be wholly erroneous. If it is embarrassed,⁵ it will most certainly be so.⁶

[...]

² Given the different roles for the word "if", generalizations about necessary and/or sufficient conditions are hard to formulate.

³ Transubstantiation is the conversion of the substance of the Eucharistic elements into the body and blood of Christ at consecration, only the appearances of bread and wine still remaining. This concept was explained a number of times in Tim's early education. But not much since then.

⁴ Fictive means created by the imagination.

⁵ Embarrassed here is an adjective meaning to have or show financial difficulties.

⁶ George Steiner, *Real Presences*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 3-4. Taken from the opening sentences of this small book: Chapter 1, *A Secondary City*.