

GEORGE STEINER

My Unwritten Books

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 210 pp

Readers are defined by what they read as much as by what they don't. George Moore shunned works of reference. "An encyclopedia in this house!" he spluttered indignantly at the enquiry of a friend. Mark Twain was not an enthusiast of *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*. "The best way to start a library," he advised, "is to leave out the works of Jane Austen." Sins of omission in writers are harder to judge, largely because, in the authorial realm, confessions of this kind are rare. Stephan Mallarmé, in a letter to Paul Verlaine, admitted that his unwritten opus was "simply a book, in several volumes, a book that is truly a book, architecturally sound and premeditated, and not a collection of casual inspirations however wonderful that might be." And Nathaniel Hawthorne jotted down in the wish-list of his notebooks: "To write a dream, which shall resemble the real course of a dream, with all its inconsistency, its eccentricities and aimlessness -- with nevertheless a leading idea running through the whole. Up to this old age of the world, no such thing has ever been written."

George Steiner, seldom daunted by *terrae incognitae*, has in his latest book confessed to seven such sins: seven unwritten books that he has, up to a point, exorcised by pinning their vaguely perceived forms to the page so that now we know what might have been and can lament what has not come to pass. *My Unwritten Books* is not, however, a compendium of wishful thinking. Each chapter is a thoughtful, fact-

filled, lucid map of somewhere whose exploration, Steiner tells, he refuses to undertake. Mysteriously, the cartography suffices.

Reading Steiner makes me wonderfully conscious of my ignorance; I become what Browning called "a picker-up of learning's crumbs," grateful for what falls off his table. Accordingly, his first "unwritten book" is on the scholar Joseph Needham, of whose monumental achievements I knew nothing. According to Steiner, Needham's writings seemingly spanned every human endeavour, from the history of science to the history of ideas, from hermeneutics and historical novels to biology and crystallography, culminating with *Science and Civilisation in China*, a multi-volume colossus begun in 1937 and continued after Needham's death in 1995. "No bibliography," Steiner writes (but this is meagre consolation) "can convey the myriad-minded density of Needham's perceptions." As Steiner's readers have come to expect, even for Needham's seemingly infinite realms, he finds a useful and unlikely chart. Proust, of all people, serves Steiner to understand the spider's web multiplicity of this "archeologist of consciousness," as he calls him. "*SCC* and the *Recherche* are," Steiner explains (and we understand exactly what he means,) "the two foremost acts of recollection, of total reconstruction, in modern thought, imagination and executive form."

Invidia is the title of the second phantom volume. "Not many today, I presume, read the works of Francesco Stabili, better known as Cecco d'Ascoli." (The "better known" stands uneasily by "I presume"; poor Cecco has long been absent from the best-seller lists.) A professor of astrology in Bologna, dismissed for heresy in 1324, said later to have dared draw the horoscope of Christ Himself, Cecco's evanescent fame

lies mainly in his antipathy towards Dante, against whom he wrote a long didactic epic poem, the *Acerba*. Envy (his contemporaries agreed) was Cecco's guiding passion, born perhaps from knowing himself incapable (the sentiment is far more complex than that) of Dante's achievements. From this observation, Steiner leads us to the greater question of *invidia* whose duality, as he points out, is reflected in the French *envie* signifying both "envy" and "desire." It is this competitive tension between creator and creature that may explain something of Cecco's feelings when reading the *Commedia*. Here Steiner must be quoted in full: "Man cannot match, let alone excel, the power, the fantastication, the awesome loveliness out of God's workshop. What are our sublimest paintings when compared with dawn? Our music when set beside that of the celestial spheres? The *Paradiso* is the classical statement of these incomparabilities. Man's only, but indestructible, counter-statement is that of words, of the grammar, in which Job is set down. A language which God must speak if He is to be heard."

"*Invidia*," like several other of these skeleton texts, remained unfleshed because, as Steiner disarmingly confesses, "it came too near the bone." "The Tongues of Eros," on the sexual life of language; "Zion," on the endemic nature of exile in the Jew and on the illuminating suggestion that "the Jew is hated not because he *killed* God but because he has *invented* and *created* Him;" "School Terms," on the multifaceted concept of public education with a central curriculum in mathematics, music, architecture and the life sciences, taught, wherever possible, historically; "Of Man and Beast," on his "confused and irrational" persuasions regarding the relationship between human beings and animals -- all may owe their dreamlike state to this compunction. But there is more.

"Philosophy," Steiner says in his aphoristic introduction, "teaches that negation can be determinant." This, other than providing a coy justification for the present volume, intimates something else, profound and essential, addressed, however incompletely, in the seventh unwritten opus, "Begging the Question." "What I have argued from my very first books onwards," Steiner tells us, "is this: it has been the 'God-question', that of God's existence or non-existence, and the attempts to give to this existence 'a habitation and a name', which until very recently have fuelled much of great art, literature and speculative constructs. They have provided consciousness with its centre of gravity." To imagine that he, George Steiner, has "anything original, let alone authoritative to offer in reply," strikes him "as an impertinence."

And yet, and yet... While eschewing a "negative mystique," Steiner nevertheless claims the right intensely to feel (despairing of what he calls "the fragility of reason") the divine absence. "It relates, and again words fail me, to the sadness, to the abyss at the heart of love. Perhaps it is something like the animate dark in which a blind man taps his way through the world's illusory noon. Meditation on a 'non-God' can be as concentrated, as humble or exultant, as any in approved theology and worship. It does not, I believe, trigger folly and hatred. Awesome is the God who is not." In this mental, spiritual space, Steiner says, we must be alone. Faith (or lack of) must be private. "Publication," the master tells us, "cheapens and falsifies belief irremediably."

Reserve, incompleteness, fragmentation, the gift of providing notes towards the definition of something destined to remain unsaid, define (only partially define) the literature we call great, explicitly in

Hercalitus, in Pascal, in Kafka, in Borges, implicitly in others. "I will do such things," promises Lear. "What they are yet I know not -- but they shall be/ The terrors of the earth." The threat suffices.

The jacket of Steiner's book depicts, standing in a row, the seven non-existent volumes, the colourful spines proudly bearing their prenatal titles. The design reflects exactly how we feel after reaching the last page: these books exist, they have been read, they continue their labours on the shelves of our memories. The fact that they have not been written is an unimportant oversight, a pardonable excess of modesty in such a joyful literary enterprise.