

NEWSWALK

# GEORGE STEINER

'I HAVE BEEN  
TOO SCATTERED  
AND DISPERSED  
AND LOVED TOO  
MANY THINGS  
PASSIONATELY'

Known as one of the 'great cultural middle-men of the 20th century' the critic and author tells Nicholas Shakespeare about a life spent as a harbinger and disseminator of other works of genius; 'a chirp bird on the back of a rhinoceros'

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DANNY NORTH FOR NEWSWEEK



# “NO.”

## NEWSWALKS

In his *Walking Essays* of 1912, a brilliant young English writer, AH Sidgwick, proposed that walking “lays a foundation of mutual respect more quickly and more surely” than any other activity. The environment of a walk was exactly right: “Familiar enough to create a sense of ease, and yet strange enough to throw the walkers back on themselves with the instinct of human solidarity.”

When Paddy Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin strode, chatting, through the Peloponnesian landscape, they were enacting Diogenes’ solvitur ambulando – it is solved by walking.

With this in mind *Newsweek* has invited some of the world’s most interesting thinkers to go on a walk of their choice, while reflecting on their own lives, inspirations and ambitions.

No walk.”

He has been interviewed by many distinguished people. This is frivolous. Plus, at 86 his health is too frail.

He is about to put down the receiver, I sense.

“Wait, what about a walk around your house and garden?”

I was thinking of Albert Speer in Spandau. How Hitler’s deputy walked in his imagination to Heidelberg, by circulating the prison garden. Yet Spandau is not Cambridge. In virtually every respect, Speer is the opposite of George Steiner.

To my mind, Steiner is an intellectual wanderer who outpaces most of his generation. Aged 17, I heard him give a fearless talk about the supremacy of literature that confirmed me in my decision to read English at university. There, I studied his *Death of Tragedy* and *After Babel*, and wished I was being taught by Steiner and not by the gauleiters of Structuralism who continued, scandalously to our minds, to deny him tenure (“I have conducted my emotional, intellectual and professional affairs in distrust of theory,” he wrote in a reticent memoir. “Theory’ is nothing but intuition grown impatient.”). In Tel Aviv a fortnight later, the Israeli novelist Amos Oz would tell me: “Jews are middle-men. George is one of the great cultural middle-men and readers of the 20th century. He makes books pass from culture to culture.”

Which is to say, if there’s an intellectual I wouldn’t mind going on a stroll with, even a circumscribed stroll, it is Francis George Steiner.

At the other end of the telephone, there’s a hesitation. “All right.”

### A cosmic tactlessness

The man in the white jersey who opens the door is smiling. Tufts of hair below the chin lend him a mandarin appearance. We shake hands awkwardly – he was born like the Kaiser and Lord Halifax with a withered arm he is unable to rotate.

“Everything depends on it,” he says. “The first years, I was in constant therapeutic treatment, clinics in Paris and Switzerland. My mother fought it like a lioness. I had to tie my shoe-laces – I could have had a zipper. No. I had to write right-handed – I could have written with my left. No. My mother simply would not allow me to evade the issue. The

great moment came, aged four, when she said, ‘You don’t realise how fortunate you are – no military service’. At that time, military service was three years, it knocked your life to bits. I felt so pleased, and never again experienced it as a handicap or punishment. It made me both different and privileged.” As well, it may have contributed to what Steiner considers his chief talent: “In my whole life, my main gift has been a cosmic tactlessness.”

We’re sitting in his drawing-room, side by side, facing the bookshelves. I take in orange curtains, a copper chimney-piece, a chess set, stacks of records on a red carpet, and a padded window-seat overflowing with art books and diplomas. Squarely facing the garden, and us, is a thrish, high-backed chair, upholstered in yellow satin.

I remind Steiner of something overlooked in today’s newspapers. On this rainy morning 75 years ago, Winston Churchill, and not the favourite contender Lord Halifax, replaced Neville Chamberlain as prime minister.

Eyes sparkling, Steiner leans forward. “Churchill signed my fellowship, you know.”

In 1961, Steiner became a founding Fellow of Churchill College, which originally was envisaged as an institution on its own, like MIT. “Churchill’s opinion of the intellectual mandarin was not high, but he gradually resigned himself to the Cambridge solution.” Steiner never met Churchill, but in a totally silent, pre-dawn London he watched his funeral “from a window allowed me by the *Daily Telegraph*”, and heard the tapping of thousands of footsteps hurrying to line the route. “I remember seeing de Gaulle almost alone on the steps. That was so complex. No great playwright or novelist could have captured it.

“Now I’m near the end of my life what mesmerises me are the limits of all fiction. Neither Shakespeare nor Dante could have invented Stephen Hawking, what he is, what he’s doing. From the tiny edge of one eyelid, he’s at the centre of the universe.”

### The yellow bird

Steiner is a denizen of the edges, too. He has spent much of his life in a ringside seat of the humanities, describing himself as “the chirp bird



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Seat of learning: George Steiner in the chair which in its time has held Jorge Luis Borges, Bruce Chatwin, Robert Pirsig and Arthur Koestler



Animals render him helpless in a way that humans do not

At home: "I belong to a rather bizarre dying species of profoundly committed intellectuals. This room is an encyclopaedia of lost humanism"

on the rhinoceros", after a little yellow bird he saw in Africa that perched on the rhino and "chirped like mad to alert everyone that a rhino was coming". In the same way, he says, a good teacher and critic will tell you, "This is the real thing. Here's why. Please read it, read it."

On the empty yellow chair opposite have sat writers who have moved Steiner to exclaim "My God, this is wonderful". Into this room in May 1991 shuffled Jorge Luis Borges, the blind magus of Argentina. To Steiner, "Borges stands for a certain moment in the history of the imagination. Even briefly, he has left a kind of spell."

Steiner says: "I've never met a person who seemed to need eyelids less. We were at the door where you just came in. 'It's going to rain soon.' I asked, 'How do you know that?' He said, 'Don't you notice the change in the smell of the flowers?'"

At the time, Steiner had two young children.

"Borges sat on that chair and told them stories. He asked me not to be in the room. We drove him to the English faculty where he was delivering a big lecture. I took him to the door. He said, 'You won't want to go in there'. He had a supernatural finesse of empathy. The English faculty had said I would not be given a post, so I had no access to the staff room."

Another occupier of the yellow chair was Bruce Chatwin - on his way back from Scotland, where he claimed to have been shooting stags. Steiner says: "I have a theory about beautiful men. It's difficult to be beautiful. And Bruce was truly beautiful. He sat on that chair and read at length from the manuscript of *Songlines*. I'd got on to Mr Shawn at the *New Yorker* [where from 1966 Steiner had replaced Edmund Wilson as chief critic]. 'This is someone you must use.' His Patagonia book had blown me with happiness. Mr Shawn turned him

down. He was a man of legendary discretion. All he would convey was a deep sense of distrust, that he didn't believe a word."

Then there was Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen & the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Steiner was doing what he normally did with unsolicited manuscripts, cramming the package into his wastepaper basket, when he read the first sentence and thought "Good God, something tremendous has landed on my desk. I'd never read a sentence like it."

"Do you remember the sentence?"

"I can see by my watch, without taking my hand from the left grip of the cycle, that it is eight-thirty in the morning."

"Pirsig came to see me and thank me - I helped launch *Zen* and reviewed it - and he told me he had written a new novel even better. But it wasn't better at all." Steiner did not reveal to Pirsig what he had told his wife Zara. There would never be another book from this man worth reading.

"Why do you think so many distinguished people want to interview you?"

"I belong to a rather bizarre dying species of profoundly committed intellectuals - the word was originally Russian, intelligentsia," and makes a sweep with his hand. "This room is an encyclopaedia of lost humanism. I have here what I believe Cambridge and the Bodleian do NOT have. A first magazine edition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The first edition of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. And the house talisman!"

He leaps up to pluck it down, a thin blue book he struggles to remove from its cardboard case.

"What is it?"

"Wait, wait, a little patience. You are like me."

With reverence, he holds it up it - to reveal a name stamped on the last page in mauve ink.

"F. KAFKA"

"Is this... No...?"

"Yes, yes, one of only three books to survive from his library!"

I read the title, *Was du tuft, das du recht*, and note that it is printed in Stuttgart in 1910.

"What you do will be right", he translates. "A pedagogic, completely undistinguished thesis on women's education."

"Have you read it?"

"No, the book is of no interest. But I have often held it. And feel a shiver, a huge shiver down my back. To imagine holding something Franz Kafka held!"

#### Walking with Freud

Like Kafka, Steiner's father Frederick - "an austere, difficult man" - worked for a bank in Vienna. In 1921 he fell in love with Else Franzos and proposed. With a conjurer's flourish, Steiner produced a visitor's card, showing a date scrawled in black ink, "3.4.1921", and some handwritten words in German, "with warm wishes for your happiness in your marriage."

An italicised name on the card explains all.

"Prof Dr. Freud und Frau"

Steiner can't help musing: "He's one of 10 or 12 great men of the world, but he went to enormous trouble to have his title of Professor."



From "Prof Dr. Freud und Frau": Sigmund's best wishes for Steiner's father's wedding

Sigmund Freud and Frederick Steiner were friends. They'd walk in Vienna, in the hills around, and talk together. Steiner's connective mind finds it impossible to imagine that Hitler, Freud, Mahler, Steiner's father, did not pass each other on the Ring, walking. "It's inescapable. They are there, in the same city, for two or three years."

Smelling the wind, his father uprooted his family to Paris where Steiner was born in 1929. The doctor who delivered him was Carl Weiss, who six years later assassinated the American presidential candidate, Huey Long, in Louisiana.

"Do you know Long's last words?" I ask.

But of course. "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do."

Steiner was five when he heard a sentence that he says formed his whole life, after watching from a window a Paris crowd shouting "Death to the Jews!" The sentence was uttered by his father: "You must never be frightened; what you're looking at is called history."

That Steiner didn't meet the fate of all but two of his Jewish classmates in his Paris lycée was thanks to a tip-off from a German businessman in neutral New York. In January 1940, in a toilet in the Wall Street Club, Steiner's father bumped into a Siemens executive he knew, who grabbed him. "You better listen to me whether you like it or not. We're coming into France very soon. Get your family out at any price." By the time Nazi tanks powered into Paris five months later, the Steiners were in America.

In the white-hot summer of 1943, another decisive moment. "I was on a suburban holiday outside New York in White Plains when in a doctor's office I see a copy of *Life* magazine, a double-page spread of members of the Soviet Academy of Science, a description of their specialities - radiology, biochemistry, mathematics." Aged 14, Steiner was forcibly struck that these leaders were not artists, but scientists. "I was transported with ambition one day to do something like that. I can't explain, but it was absolutely decisive. My only ambition was



Steiner and his books: "The idea was to have the 1,200 volumes I needed most. It absolutely didn't work. I have to keep running back"

to study science at Chicago." He had good enough teachers there. Enrico Fermi lectured him on physics. Harold Urey on chemistry. But it was no good.

"I was told I was technically an idiot. I had the memory training of the French lycée system, but not a spark of creativity. If, as a certain Jim Watson was, I had been sent to biology... As it was, almost heartbroken, I came to literature and philosophy."

From Chicago, he graduated to Harvard, next to Oxford, where his thesis, which became *The Death of Tragedy*, was rejected ("A touch dazzling, wouldn't you say?"); then to *The Economist*, to Princeton, and in 1961 to Cambridge. Bruised at not being made a professor, he considered returning to America, but a conversation with his father in the Oak Room of the Plaza put a kybosh on that. Steiner was listing the advantages of American universities, when his father said after a long silence: "How sad that Hitler has won." Steiner wrote: "Nothing was strong enough in me to bear the immense world of sad disdain in that remark." Steiner elected to remain in Europe.

#### Poplar, willow, elm

He fetches a key and takes me in small, delicate steps out into his English garden.

"Those are my poplars, that's my willow."

"Are you good on trees?"

"I don't talk to them."

"What's that one?"

"My elm!"

The lawn glitters with an earlier rain, like the one he met his wife in more than 50 years ago, in London (Zara told me: "In came this figure with a tiny umbrella and rain pouring down"). They have been together ever since. "The only divorce possibility, the one *casus belli* is that," and he motions at the wooden fence. "My wife has heightened that fence because a deer comes and eats the flowers. I say to her, 'You can go to the florist'."

Animals render him helpless in a way that humans do not. Following a succession of English

sheepdogs, he now has a "very shy" rescue dog called Muzz ("short for muzzle"), who pads after us. "Anyone who harms an animal in front of me, I would gladly kill. It's as total with me as breathing." It even has affected Steiner's hitherto unconditional love of Proust. "We now know so much of Proust's torture of animals is true. Biography can be the enemy of insight."

Our walk today takes us from his house to his purpose-built study in the garden, and back. A journey of less than a hundred yards. Yet, I like to think, an illustration of Borges's celebrated parable: of the ancient wanderer who draws a map of everywhere he has been in his life, and discovers that he has delineated his own face.

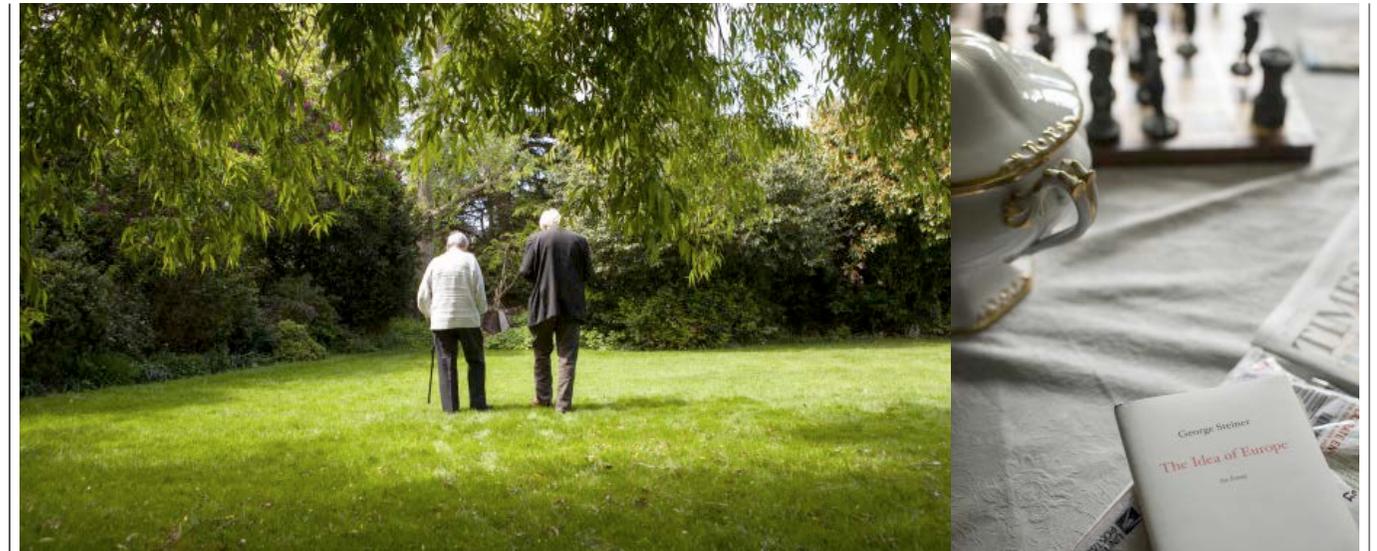
His first walks were in Paris. Rue Lafontaine, Place Victor Hugo. "In summer as child I would go to our retreat in Normandy where Monet painted, Etretat." Later, based in Geneva, Steiner discovered mountain-climbing, and scaled the rock-face of the Salève, as the student Borges had done, back in the days when he could see.

"What's your favourite walk?"

"In the Jura, near where Courbet had a house, a group of hills above Ornans; a wonderful landscape combining ancient reminders of civilisation with wild country - bits of Roman and Gallic fortifications and very exciting traces of the Burgundian wars."

Steiner writes of the importance of walking in his latest book, *The Idea of Europe*. Kant's chronometrically precise traverse of Königsberg. The rambles of Kierkegaard through Copenhagen. The portly Coleridge routinely covering 30 miles per diem across difficult, mountainous ground, composing poetry or intricate theological arguments as he strode. It's something that differentiates us from America, Steiner believes. "One does not go on foot from one American town to the next."

Europe, by contrast, has been moulded and humanised by human feet. It's not too much to say that our entire philosophy has been conditioned by walking, by the same simple action of putting



Light and shade: "Europe is the place," Steiner reminds us in *The Idea of Europe* (right), "where Goethe's garden almost borders on Buchenwald"

one foot before another that brings us in no time to our destination.

Steiner inserts the key, invites me inside.

His study is a pentagon with a pyramidal roof. "I designed this from a very simple set of mathematical dimensions, to maximise content in relation to space."

"Who chose the turquoise carpet?"

"Zara."

Light from an overhead pane falls onto a desk occupied by a sizable electric typewriter. He sits here every morning after picking a book at random. "I take a paragraph and translate it into my four languages" - writing the translations on a scrap of paper that he throws into the wastepaper basket. He calls his habit "a musical exercise in being the plural me". Then, after replying to the half dozen letters he receives every day, he reads for an hour or two.

Behind, to the sides, and facing the desk are more books, wall to packed wall, defining the whole width of his horizon. "The idea was to have the 1,200 volumes I needed most. It absolutely didn't work. I have to keep running back."

He introduces them, like friends. On the opposite shelves: Nietzsche, Hegel. On the left wall: Celan, the Frankfurt School." The blue volumes? "Those are Lukács, signed." Next to him, Ernst Bloch. "Here's Benjamin, Adorno..."

"Not many women," I say.

"That's not my fault. They didn't write the books."

"Which would you most mind a robber stealing?"

Steiner nods at the topmost shelf behind his desk. "My household god. Coleridge. Even in his worst moments he is so human. Even in his worst moments, there's not one when he doesn't come at you as a terribly hurt human being. There are 30 volumes or more. You'd have to come with a wheelbarrow."

#### "There will be a war"

Back in his drawing-room, our photographer asks

Steiner to pose in the yellow chair. Once seated, he recalls another formidable writer, Arthur Koestler, sitting in this chair and weeping that, yet again, he had been overlooked by the Nobel committee. "Oh, no," I told him, "you wrote *Darkness at Noon*. You changed history."

I ask: "What would you like to have written?"

"An absolutely first rate piece of fiction."

"What do you think prevented you?"

"I have been too scattered and dispersed, and loved too many things passionately."

Or did something else constrain him? Even as he chirped out the names of important authors for us to read, he continually warned that the rhino on which he perched was a trampling beast. That the humanities do not humanise per se, but too often condone bestiality. "Europe is the place," he reminds us in *The Idea of Europe*, "where Goethe's garden almost borders on Buchenwald."

Steiner is pessimistic that we have never been more brutal to each other, and a catastrophe is looming. "There will be a war. I can be more precise. It's coming." An Islamic religious war that sets up the next Armageddon, with hundreds of thousands of dead Sunni and Shia. "Those are implacable hatreds. We already can't stop the landings in Italy of boat people. It's in flood."

Still, he takes heart that in catastrophic times "people will be back to reading, back to thinking, back to music. Don't worry, destiny does not like emptiness." And tells me of the Chechen attack on a Russian school in Grozny. "The children been three days without water or food, but with a brave teacher who, on the third day, said, 'Let's pray together to God and the Gospels'. The children refused. 'We are praying to Harry Potter's wizard, and he will come.' And the children were right."



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