experiment by experiment, conjecture by conjecture, into the vast sphere of the unknown. For Newton, though, the words may plausibly have had a very different meaning. He was simply using the instruments of geometry and history to pare away the greasy crust and canker of forty misguided centuries.

If there was one man who in Newton's eyes had done more than any other to lead humanity astray, it was Athanasius. The bruising Bishop of Alexandria had battered his way through the fourth century's Christological controversies with such implacable force that Trinitarianism – the belief that God is a communion of three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are all equal manifestations of the same metaphysical substrate – became the touchstone of Christian orthodoxy.

For Newton, this creed was nothing short of devilry. The worship of Christ as a face of the godhead was not just akin to the cult of the golden calf: it was far more insidious. As Iliffe shows, Newton threw himself into the prosecution of Athanasius with much the same furious zest and legalistic diligence that he brought to his academic disputes with Hooke and Leibniz. Athanasius and his followers were not simply wrong; they were a cabal of thuggish crooks who had hijacked an entire religion by falsifying texts, perverting holy Scripture and threatening to bring down the Roman Empire through violence. This incandescent hatred of a man who had been dead for 1,400 years formed perhaps the greatest passion of Newton's life.

Regarded as an exercise in sheer industry and insight, *Priest of Nature* is an immensely impressive book. Newton sifted vigorously through a quite bewildering amount of primary material, ferreting details out of the apparatus criticus as cleverly as he corralled obscure historians with names like Socrates Scholasticus and Salminius Sozomenus. Iliffe seems to have followed him for pretty much every step of the way. It is a rare person who has the stomach and the spectacular mastery of intellectual history to determine which precise edition of Calvin's *Institutes* Newton would have been referring to, or how he came upon Pallades's *Lausian History*.

One puzzling absence is that of Johannes Kepler, who coined the conceit that gave this biography its title, describing astronomers in a letter of 1598 as "priests of the highest God with respect to the book of nature". Beside Kepler's influence on Newton's philosophical inquiry, they shared a deep interest in theology and a personal experience of conflict with the religious establishments of their day. There are so many parallels between the men's lives that a comparison might have been useful.

Readers who are not scholars of Restoration theology may also feel that Priest of Nature never quite lives up to the thunderous promise of its introduction. The writing is seldom less than lively and elegant, but the methodical trawl through Newton's sources and Rob Iliffe's partchronological, part-thematic structure can be a bit of a slog at times. This is a shame. With a little more editorial brutality, the book might have made Newton new and strange for a very sizeable popular audience. The story of his lonely and quixotic pursuit of the truth, against the prevailing winds of his own age and a dozen ages that had passed before him, should make anybody pause to consider what folly and wisdom really are and how they relate to each other. It deserves to be better known.

On the couch

Exploring the strengths and weaknesses of an anachronistic intellect

THOMAS MEANEY

George Steiner with Laure Adler

> A LONG SATURDAY Conversations

Translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan 115pp. University of Chicago Press. £14.99 (US \$22.50). 978 0 226 35038 7

or readers born under the Reagan-**★** Thatcher dispensation, the work of George Steiner has a curiously otherworldly quality: his concerns can appear so remote, his writing so opaque, that you might as well have stumbled on a volume of Sainte-Beuve. The curiousness has less to do with his method of criticism - Steiner's mind is too fine for methods - still less in the way he erects the whimsies of his taste into a rickety authority. Rather, it is in the way that Steiner conjures up a vanished world, a lost literary utopia of high seriousness and purpose, which he guides you through like a collector in his own museum. In his memoir Errata (1997), Steiner took great pains to show himself shuttling among the

great intellectual shades of the twentieth century: who else can claim Claude Lévi-Strauss as their high school teacher; Leo Strauss and Allen Tate as decisive college instructors; a career change from financial journalism to literary criticism based on ten minutes with Robert Oppenheimer; vacations with R. P. Blackmur; shop-talk lunches with Gershom Scholem at the same table in Berne where Gershom Scholem had shop-talk lunches with Walter Benjamin, "the R. P. Blackmur of Marxism"; a near coming to blows with the right-wing historian Ernst Nolte about the crimes of Martin Heidegger averted only by the intervention of . . . Hans-Georg Gadamer? But remember with whom you are dealing: George Steiner has already read his daily passage of Parmenides in the original before you have had your breakfast.

By any reckoning Steiner is one of the major critics of the second half of the twentieth century. But if his accomplishments do not impinge on younger generations, it may have something to do with the meticulous dismembering of him by James Wood in *Prospect* in 1995. Wood's article was less a killing of the father than a bravura taking down of an odd-

ball uncle. Together with Harold Bloom, Steiner by the 1990s was one of the more strident protesters against postmodernism and deconstruction, which together with the baseness of American culture, had conspired to block all new offerings at the altar of "greatness". Wood diagnosed Steiner's "greatness" fetish, in contrast to Bloom's, as an elitist and pretentious aversion to the possibility of powerful democratic art. The nub of Wood's argument was that Steiner was the sort of reader who, though he had followed Saul Bellow by only a few years at the University of Chicago, was unable to recognize Bellow's demotic genius because he was too busy creating his lists of worthies in a world where, to Steiner's horror, people gazed at Vermeers while chewing sandwiches. Wood's Prospect essay rendered a verdict from which Steiner's reputation has not fully recovered: Wood now holds Steiner's old post as the lead literary critic at the New Yorker. It is not clear whether Steiner misses his time as chief arbiter of American literary taste, but it is not hard to suspect that he always felt he was slumming it when writing for American glossies: you imagine him wincing that his delicate probings of Céline and Canetti had to share space with ads for deodorant and raincoats.

If Steiner's book of conversations, A Long Saturday, with the French journalist Laure Adler is to be welcomed, it's because it lays out more sharply than his recent memoirsoliloquies just what his strengths and weaknesses are. Despite his long opposition to psychoanalysis, we have here before us Steiner on the couch, rummaging through his memories, clipping well-manicured thoughts, but also in a mood to refurbish some of his main insights. It says something that this is a book translated from the French, one of several European languages Steiner knows more than fluently. It also says something that Steiner, perhaps more than any other Englishlanguage critic, is read with interest across the Continent: in German some of his books have originally appeared in Suhrkamp's prestigious Wissenschaftsprogramm editions alongside those of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann; his work has on occasion appeared earlier in Italian than in English; in France and parts of Eastern Europe he is taken as an indisputable sage, well beyond his status in the Anglosphere as a critic. Towards the end of these conversations, Steiner speaks of himself with false modesty as a "postman" to the great masters, bringing in the news of their work. But even if his accomplishments were limited to these deliveries, we are already well in his debt. It is likely that English-readers would have learned of Paul Celan, Thomas Bernhard and Walter Benjamin much later than they did had it not been for Steiner's indefatigable proselytizing.

Several of the more revealing and interesting moments in Steiner's conversations with Adler hinge on Great People Steiner Has Known. In some of these encounters he comes off very well, almost despite himself. He is the child of Viennese Jewish parents, who moved the

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6 MEMOIRS

family twice away from the fascist threat, first to Paris, later to New York, where Steiner attended the Lycée Français, whose faculty was fielded by an extraordinary roster of émigrés. For his undergraduate studies, Steiner moved farther west, to the University of Chicago, where he was part of the educational experiment conducted by Robert Maynard Hutchins in which promising thirteen-yearolds - Steiner's classmates included Richard Rorty, Robert Bork and Robert Silvers - were purposely thrown into dormitories with returning American GIs from the war. The New Yorker called it the greatest magnet for neurotic iuveniles since the Children's Crusade. When Steiner first entered a seminar by the Weimarexile political philosopher Leo Strauss on the dialogues of Plato, Strauss mentioned that one contemporary philosopher's name - "who is, of course, strictly incomparable" - would not be mentioned in the class. Who could this possibly be, Steiner earnestly asked his older classmates? When he learned the name, Steiner rushed to the library where he immediately checked out a copy of Martin Heidegger's as yet untranslated Sein und Zeit. Though he could make little sense of its opening paragraphs, Steiner was determined to go on. The result, several decades later, was his Martin Heidegger (1978), which may still be the most intellectually thrilling and accessible introduction to the thinker. One of Steiner's main virtues as a reader is his intellectual discipline: he simply does not give up when he encounters difficulty in a text, but takes resistance to his understanding as a welcome gauntlet.

But there are other moments in these interviews where Steiner descends into self-parody. One of these is the encounter with Robert Oppenheimer. Steiner has come to the School of Advanced Study at Princeton to interview Oppenheimer for The Economist; Oppenheimer cancels the meeting at the last moment. Steiner is invited into the office of the Plato specialist, Harold Cherniss. Cherniss, sensing something special in the financial journalist, shows Steiner a passage of Plato he is editing. There is a lacuna Cherniss is trying to fill. "Oppenheimer came in and sat behind us", Steiner recounts. "It was the ideal trap: if the people you're talking to can't see you, they feel paralyzed and you become master of the situation." Oppenheimer asks the young financial journalist what should be done with the passage. Steiner buys time with a round of stammering. "A great text should have some empty space", Oppenheimer finally declares. But the young financial journalist is not going to be put down so easily. Here is Steiner's memory of his own reply: "That's a pompous cliché. First, your statement is a quote from Mallarmé. Second, it is the type of paradox you can play with ad infinitum. But when you are trying to prepare an edition of Plato for the mere mortal, it is better that the empty spaces be filled". Oppenheimer is now against the ropes, but still not ready to give in. "No, in philosophy especially it is the implicit that stimulates argument", he responds. Fin. The young financial journalist has not necessarily won, but he is hired. Steiner gave up his post at The Economist and took up residence as a junior fellow at the School of Advanced Study. What unsettles about the story is not that it is a wellchiselled tale of the triumph of the mot juste totsaniert, you might say - but rather that its relentlessly sprightly dialogue makes all of Steiner's memories of his best lines blend into



George Steiner, 2005

one monumental quotation of airtight brilliance. He is regrettably often, one senses, on a mission to salvage his reputation for intelligence when no one has bothered to question it.

The most fascinating passages in A Long Saturday concern one of Steiner's defining subjects: the depths of human evil and its disturbing connections to high culture. Adler asks Steiner about Israel. Steiner is a famous anti-Zionist, but here he goes even further, condemning Israel as a perpetrator of evil. "I'm a complete ethical snob", Steiner tells Adler. 'I'm arrogant ethically; by becoming a people like all others, the Israelis have forfeited that nobility I had attributed to them." For Steiner, the nobility of Jewishness lies in its exceptionalism when it comes to the humiliation of other peoples (exactly when the humiliation of Palestinians began is not a question for him). "The highest nobility is to have belonged to a people that has never humiliated another people", he writes. Steiner relies on some unconventional support for his thesis that Israel has robbed Jews of their great asset of ethical superiority: Hitler, Heidegger and Solzhenitsyn. When Hitler says that "the Jew invented conscience", Steiner could not agree more. When Heidegger says, "We are the guests of life", Steiner takes this as the most moving ethical expression he knows. When Solzhenitsyn says, "The virus of communism, of Bolshevism, is totally Jewish and has infected the holy Virgin of Kazan and Russian theocracy", Steiner performs his best kind of ironic nod. Some of Steiner's finest books - Nostalgia for the Absolute (1997), for example - are attempts to read Jewish writers against the grain of their own flight from Judaism. In A Long Saturday, Steiner makes a powerful point when he suggests that the highest calling for the modern Jew is to be a tireless ethical gadfly, and that anti-Semitism is an ineradicable feature of modernity: "a kind of human cry, 'Leave me alone!' It's a cry against the moral pestering Judaism represents".

One of Steiner's long-running provocations

is that human evil is not only not foreign to high culture, but has formed some kind of pact with it. This is typically paired with his other, companion, point: that great art is more likely to be produced under the strain of totalitarianism and authoritarianism than under democratic regimes. ("I wonder why", Philip Roth once mused, "all the writers I know in Czechoslovakia loathe the regime and passionately wish it would disappear from the face of the earth. Don't they understand, with Steiner, that this is their chance to be great?") Both of these claims have been repeatedly overstated over the years, to the point that the Bach-wasplayed-at-Buchenwald mantra has transformed in Steiner's mind into a necessary affinity between high art and depravity. In full provocative mode, he confesses to Adler that as someone who is occupied with great work for many of his waking hours, he is therefore less likely than most other citizens to save the proverbial bystander from drowning:

When I'm on my way home and hear someone yell "Help" in the street, my ears might hear, but I'm not listening. That's the difference between hearing and listening. I should run to help; but I don't because what's actually occurring in the street has a sort of disorder to it, a contingency that doesn't reach the transcendent immensity of the suffering that is described in a great work of art – music, painting, or poem.

Lo, reader: there is an evil form of negligence cultivated by high art towards the quotidian! You can save a drowning person, and you can memorize Mallarmé, but you can't do both. Yet this sort of confession only shows what has been on display for a long time in Steiner's thinking: that his unwillingness or inability to save drowning people has really nothing to do with art, and contains no intractable paradox, but is rather bound up with his own personal style. He mentions, for instance, that when Israelis respond to him that he can't criticize Israel without living there, he agrees that to have ethical standing "I would have to be there, on the street corner giving my absurd

spiel". This is not an image of himself that he savours. In another moment in the book. Steiner tells of his near fist-fight with Ernst Nolte at a Martin Heidegger centennial celebration in Freiburg. Steiner is placated when Gadamer says "Steiner! Steiner! Calm down. Martin was the greatest of thinkers and the basest of men". All was patched up after that; nothing satisfies Steiner like a good paradox. But perhaps the most interesting of Steiner's ethical pronouncements is not touched on in A Long Saturday. Back in 1967, when Noam Chomsky (who himself would make an interesting candidate for a section of Nostalgia for the Absolute) published his "Responsibility of Intellectuals" as a special supplement in the New York Review of Books, Steiner forced on him the question of what should actually be done in real time by scholars to stop the Vietnam War. Chomsky admitted he had no adequate response, and confessed to being embarrassed that all he was prepared to do was not pay his taxes, but that perhaps, if he were braver, he would travel to Hanoi to be a hostage. Steiner, you feel, has got his man. The futility of Chomsky's gestures are pathetic in Steiner's eyes, and so a retreat from political responsibility becomes a matter of maintaining personal dignity.

There are some illuminating passages in this book about Steiner's sexual technique. Like a good clinician, Adler discusses what gives Steiner erections, and quotes one of Steiner's racier passages back to him:

A-M took pride in the thicket of her "burning bush." Gardens are the scenes of assignation, of sexual witchcraft (as in Tasso). First my tongue was to brush, barely brush, the dew from the outer petal. Penetration could ensue only with almost unbearable *rallentando* and lightness. The violets had to be . . .

These may be words of wisdom in the Weinstein moment, but Adler can only take so much of it. The main embarrassments in A Long Saturday come in the form of provincialism, not a charge usually pinned on Steiner. His inaccuracies about foreign countries ("Malaysia . . . where one grows up speaking three languages") and his sub-tabloid depictions of Islam are unworthy of him. Steiner admits that he "missed the boat" when it came to jazz, rock and rap, and that while he recognizes that some films are great, he still suspects that even the best ones can only be seen two or three times, "but the fourth time, it's dead. Completely dead". He suggests that no woman has ever produced anything great in science out of a sadistic or fascistic impulse, but then admits he might be wrong about that.

What comes through in the end is that it was never Steiner's specific judgements that mattered, nor his strained oppositions, or endless lists of angels and demons, but rather something that vibrated between the lines: with Steiner the distinctions between life and literature wither away almost completely. Somewhere along the course of his long tenure as a mandarin he became like a character in a novel. Sometimes the character seemed like a wanly smiling professor out of Nabokov, or one of those improbably worldly dinner guests at the Guermantes' table. Steiner presses his taste on you like a desperate man who has summoned ex-cathedra ardour to drown out the nagging sense that he may only be a postman. But it was always more the passion of his deliveries, rather than the messages themselves, that got through.