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# The Syntax of Hope

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*George Steiner (1929–2020) was an American literary and cultural critic with a particular interest in the metaphysics of language. Born in Paris to Viennese Jewish parents, he moved to the States when he was eleven and completed his education in England, lecturing at both Oxford and Cambridge. A controversial figure from the beginning of his career, Steiner was ultimately perhaps the most influential humanist of his generation. An academic, yet always the outsider, he took the classic texts of the literary and philosophical traditions as maps of the human spirit. A man of great breadth of culture, yet trenchant judgments; his curiosity and intellectual integrity were of sufficient intensity to enable him to champion the work of Heidegger and Pierre Bouffier. Among his most famous books are Tolstoy or Dostoevsky (1960), The Death of Tragedy (1961), In Bluebeard's Castle (1971), After Babel (1975), and Real Presences (1989).*

*The following excerpt from is taken from [Grammars of Creation](#) (Yale University Press/Faber and Faber, 2002), based on the 1990 Gifford Lectures given by George Steiner at the University of Glasgow. It is presented with the permission of Open Road Media.*

We have no more beginnings. *Incipit*, that proud Latin word signaling the start, survives in our dusty *inception*. The medieval scribe marks the opening line, the new chapter, with an illuminated capital. In its golden or carmine vortex the illuminator of manuscripts sets heraldic beasts, dragons at morning, singers and prophets. The initial, where this term signifies beginning and primacy, acts as a fanfare. It declares Plato's maxim—by no means self-evident—whereby in all things natural and human the origin is the most excellent. Today, in Western orientations—observe the muted presence of morning light in that word—the reflexes, turns of perception, are those of afternoon, of twilight.

There have been previous senses of ending and fascinations with sundown in Western culture. Philosophic witness, the arts, historians of feeling, report on “closing-times in the gardens of the West” during the crises of the Roman imperial order, during the apocalyptic fears at the approach of the first millennium A.D., in the wake of the Black Death and the Thirty Years' War. Motions of decay, of autumn and failing light, have always attached to men and women's awareness of physical ruin, of common mortality. Moralists, even prior to Montaigne, pointed out that the newborn infant is old enough to die. There is in the most confident metaphysical construct, in the most affirmative work of art, a *memento mori*, a labor, implicit or explicit, to hold at bay the seepage of fatal time, of entropy into each and every living form. It is from this wrestling match that philosophic discourse and the generation of art derive their informing stress, the unresolved tautness of which logic and beauty are formal modes. The cry “the great god Pan is dead” haunts even those societies with which we associate, perhaps too conventionally, the gusto of optimism.

Nevertheless, there is, I think, in the climate of spirit at the end of the twentieth century, a core-tiredness. The inward chronometry, the contracts with time that so largely determine our consciousness, point to late afternoon in ways that are ontological—this is to say, of the essence, of the

fabric of being. We are, or feel ourselves to be, latecomers. The shadows lengthen. We seem to bend earthward and toward the night as do heliotropic plants.

Inhumanity is, so far as we have historical evidence, perennial. There have been no utopias, no communities of justice or forgiveness. Our current alarms—at the violence in our streets, at the famines in the so-called Third World, at regressions into barbaric ethnic conflicts, at the possibility of pandemic disease—must be seen against the backdrop of a quite exceptional moment. Roughly from the time of Waterloo to that of the massacres on the Western Front in 1915–16, the European bourgeoisie experienced a privileged season, an armistice with history. Underwritten by the exploitation of industrial labor at home and colonial rule abroad, Europeans knew a century of progress, of liberal dispensations, of reasonable hope. It is in the afterglow, no doubt idealized, of this exceptional calendar—note the constant comparison of the years prior to August 1914 to a “long summer”—that we suffer our present discomforts.

We have not yet begun to gauge the damage to man—as a species, as one entitling himself *sapiens*—inflicted by events since 1914. We do not yet begin to grasp the coexistence in time and in space, a coexistence sharpened by the immediacy of graphic and verbal presentation in the global mass media, of Western superfluity, and the starvation, the destitution, the infant mortality, that now batten on some three-fifths of mankind. There is a dynamic of clear-sighted lunacy in our waste of what is left of natural resources, of fauna and flora. The south col of Everest is a garbage dump. Forty years after Auschwitz, the Khmer Rouge bury alive an estimated hundred thousand innocent human beings. The rest of the world, fully apprised of the fact, does nothing. New weapons soon start flowing from our factories to the killing fields. To repeat: violence, oppression, economic enslavement, and social irrationality have been endemic in history, whether tribal or metropolitan. But this century has given despair a new warrant. It has raised the distinct possibility of a reversal of evolution, of a systematic turnabout toward bestialization. It is this that makes Kafka's *Metamorphosis* the key fable of modernity.

What I want to consider briefly is the impact of this darkened condition on grammar—where I take grammar to mean the articulate organization of perception, reflection, and experience, the nerve structure of consciousness when it communicates with itself and with others. I intuit (these are, of course, almost wholly conjectural domains) that the future tense came relatively late into human speech. It may have developed as late as the end of the last ice age, together with the “futures” entailed by food storage, by the making and preservation of tools beyond immediate need, and by the very gradual discovery of animal breeding and agriculture. In some “meta-” or prelinguistic register, animals would appear to know presentness and, one supposes, a measure of remembrance. The future tense, the ability to discuss possible events on the day after one's funeral or in space a million years hence, looks to be specific to *Homo sapiens*. As does the use of the subjunctive and of counterfactual modes that are themselves kindred, as it were, to future tenses. It is only man, so far as we can conceive, who has the means of altering his world by resort to “if” clauses, who can generate clauses such as: “If Caesar had not gone to the Capitol that day.” It seems to me that this fantastic, formally incommensurable “grammatology” of verb futures, of subjunctives and optatives, proved indispensable to the survival, to the evolution, of the “language animal,” confronted, as we were and are, by the scandal, by the incomprehensibility of individual death. There is a sense in which every human use of the future tense of the verb *to be* is a negation, however limited, of mortality. Even as every use of an “if” sentence tells of a refusal of the brute inevitability, of the despotism of the fact. *Shall*, *will*, and *if*, circling in intricate fields of semantic force around a hidden center or nucleus of potentiality, are the passwords to hope.

Hope and fear are supreme fictions empowered by syntax. They are as indivisible from each other as they are from grammar. Hope encloses a fear of unfulfillment. Fear has in it a mustard seed of hope, the intimation of overcoming. It is the status of hope today that is problematic.

*George Steiner (1929–2020) was a humanist, literary polymath, essayist, and cultural critic.*

