



Your First Time in Here?

by the Semi-Shitfaced Fart on the Stool by the Blackboard



Did you notice an obituary in February for ... not to name-drop, but ... George Steiner?

Oh. You don't know who he was? Well, he may have been Cambridge University's most erudite, accomplished, cultured and brainy person, as some thought – including

him. The polymath's polymath. My American poet friend John Hollander was visiting Cambridge, where I lived, and he decided to call on Steiner. Not that I was a polymath, but John introduced us. In our first brief conversation Steiner used the word 'mimesis,' which I had to look up later.

Besides being bookish, erudite and seemingly suave, Steiner was legendary for misfortunes and clumsy mistakes. He only held a college appointment to lecture in English, not a university professorship or even a post in the English Department, because the Cambridge English dons were even stuffier than Steiner and probably thought he was trying too hard. In the wrong way. One time Steiner invited lots of literary people from London to an afternoon party at his house in Cambridge. On arriving, they found the party was over – the wine had run out. All that way, and no lunch!

Another time, I was involved. I was handing in a piece I wrote to Nick Tomalin, the arts editor of the *New Statesman*. It had been announced that Nick was leaving the magazine, to be replaced by Anthony Thwaite.

'You live in Cambridge,' said Nick. 'Do you know George Steiner?'

'Yes,' I said, chuffed to have been considered worthy of his acquaintance.

'Read this,' he said.

He handed me a letter from Steiner that had come in that morning. 'Dear Thwaite,' it said. 'I look forward to your brilliant arts editorship, which will restore the *New Statesman* to the glories it formerly had. Enclosed is a book review assigned to me by your predecessor. I was told it would have my usual lead space. Yours, Steiner.'

I laughed. 'What are you going to do about this?' I said.

Long pause. 'Nothing,' said Nick. 'And by the way, I never promised him the lead arts space. But I'd like you to tell this story to as many people as possible.'

I'm still doing as Tomalin asked, and telling the story.

John Hollander and I maintained a friendship with Steiner, but it was two-faced. We loved and bitchily passed on these stories about his faux pas. (When I leaked the Tomalin story to the *Cambridge Evening News*, Steiner wrote indignantly to the paper denying ever having written the letter I'd seen.) So one day I had the brilliant idea of inviting Steiner to lunch with a character we knew who was his polar opposite: Jay Landesman, a raunchy, pot-smoking American in retirement in London, where he and his wife hung out with the grossest rock musicians and beatniks. Hollander and I would throw the lunch so we could have a laugh.

I should have realised that things would go wrong when, on the phone to Jay, he seemed extremely impressed to be invited to meet Steiner.

On the day of the lunch, up comes scruffy Jay wearing an outfit from the pages of *Men in Vogue*, and driving a clapped-out but still estimable Rolls. Steiner joined us on the porch for Jay's arrival, and my heart sank when I saw he was impressed.

The lunch I made was pretty good, but the Steiner-Landesman encounter was a disaster – for John and me. In the first few minutes, Steiner had quizzed Jay and found out that some years previously he had founded a Beat Generation quarterly called *Neurotica*, which had published contributions from people esteemed by them both.

'What did you do after *Neurotica* closed?' Steiner wanted to know. Well, Jay had gone back to his home town, St Louis, and opened a nightclub that featured some of the earliest appearances of Lenny Bruce, Barbra Streisand and Woody Allen. Steiner was completely agog. John and I were choked.

It served us right, I always thought afterwards. At Jay Landesman's funeral a couple of years ago, his son told me that Jay had loved meeting Steiner, and had praised me for introducing them.

May flights of angels sing youse guys to your rest.