

GEORGE STEINER

A P.S. TO VALESIO

The fashionable stance of the younger academics, particularly at those universities where there is a servile imitation of French Marxism-structuralism, is one of terrorism. The work to be reviewed is, as Valesio says, no more than a 'pre-text' either for political onslaught or an immensely inflationary and Narcissistic presentation of one's own investments. Valesio observes external courtesies. But the fundamental tactic is one of total indifference towards the job in hand: the review of another man's work. The breach of trust here seems to me fundamentally ethical and of a kind that makes humane collaborative discourse and fruitful dissent impossible (but these very criteria are exactly those of the archaic or bourgeois 'urbanity' which Valesio professes to deplore though he himself – through his occupation at Yale and through his use of a 'review' to advertise his own published and forthcoming work at every occasion – in fact is a beneficiary of the genteel system). The ethical breach leads inevitably to a rather sad empirical consequence. *After Babel* is or is not a good book, is or is not a seminal and major work. The readers of *Semiotica* have a right to be allowed to know what is in it and then to make up their minds. The book contains a central philosophic section on the 'fictive' nature of speech-acts and on the radically evolutionary and adaptive character of this 'fictive' ontology. It proposes an elaborate four-step model for the act of translation which includes the first attempt in depth (perhaps a failure) to find a philosophic-pragmatic basis for the concept of translational 'fidelity'. Valesio totally ignores these essential sections of the book – and that they are essential has been made clear to me not only by the great mass of genuine reviews but by the colloquia on the book already held in Louvain and Zurich, and soon to be held in Budapest. In short, Valesio leaves the reader of *Semiotica* totally uninformed about the contents and merits/demerits of the book he had accepted to review.

I cannot enter in detail on his own work. The crucial point is this: when a man proclaims that he is dealing with "the politics of the text" and with