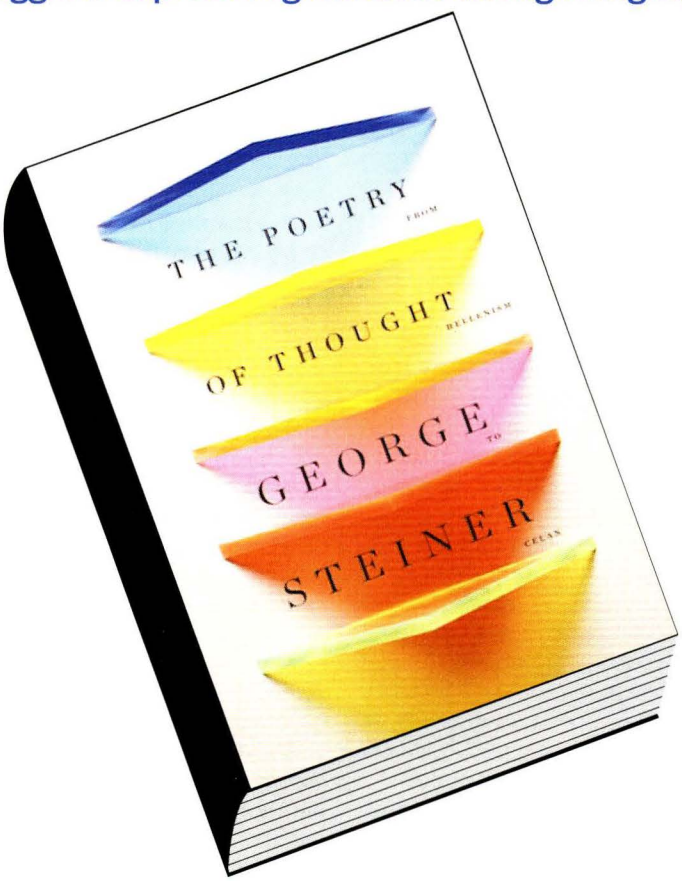
Creativity? It's all Greek to me

Tom Palaima lauds a reflection on the millennia-old struggle to express original ideas through language



The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan
By George Steiner
New Directions Publishing
223pp, £15.99
ISBN 9780811219457
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What are thoughts? Who has them? Who first had them? How are thoughts thought? Is thinking thoughts different from expressing them? How are thoughts expressed? What happens to them when they are? Are thoughts and feelings tied together? If the process of having thoughts came into being, can it also come to an end? If so, what might cause this terrifying possibility to happen?

None of these questions is asked so plainly in George Steiner's *The Poetry of Thought: From Hellenism to Celan*, but all are explored with subtle care. Thoughtful readers will come away with heightened sensibilities and intimations about the Western tradition of humanistic thought. I think Steiner, if he were to speak or write plainly, would say that having a sense of understanding bordering on knowing is the best that even the most thoughtful *homines sapientes* can do. It is not glib to call to mind Plato's account of Socrates' explanation, at the end of his own life – in fact, when his own life was in peril – of his relationship to thoughts: that he was wiser in not thinking he knew things that he did not know.

This is a dense book. Its pages are filled with ideas written in Steiner's own poetic, almost Johnsonian Latinate, prose. It contains many unglossed terms and phrases taken from serious Hebrew, Greek, Roman, German, French, Italian, Russian and Romanian thought-makers. In most cases, simple English equivalents for Steiner's own abstract words or for borrowed terms and phrases – and all their attendant implications – cannot be found. There is no way to do this book justice in a review, but arguably, and fortunately, no way to do it serious injustice either. Why? Because in *The Poetry of Thought*, Steiner is writing down his own thoughts on thoughts for himself, rather than for us who do not have his polymathic familiarity with philosophy, poetry, music, literature and mathematics from the Greek pre-Socratics until the late 20th century.

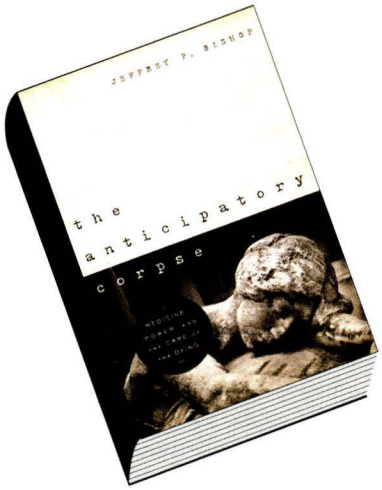
There are no notes. There are no indices. Some few translations of the words of cited thinkers are given in a brief appendix. The translations seem to have been done when Steiner himself was wrestling with how to understand in English the thought content of the original passages. Steiner calls his book an essay. It is. It is also an argument in the literal sense. It casts light and helps us see.

Steiner's thesis is that the "intellectual and poetic creativity" of the Greeks "during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. remains unique in human history. In some respects, the life of the mind thereafter is a copious footnote." *The Poetry of Thought* extends that footnote. Steiner starts from the song poems of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles and Homer before them, from metaphor that gave birth to abstract thoughts and to poetic instincts and tools that have been used by thinkers throughout the Western tradition to express what Coleridge called "thoughts all too deep for words".

In a brief last chapter, Steiner reflects on the new technologies that threaten privacy, silence and memory, that block our paths to "the poem and the philosophical statement". He writes that "the humanities" (his quotation marks) "bleakly failed us in the long night of the twentieth century". But he places hope that "somewhere a rebellious singer, a philosopher inebriate with solitude will say, 'No' ", and thereby rekindle the lightning of thought of Heraclitus and of Karl Marx. Steiner shares Marx's belief that books and words can "irradiate the dormant spirit of men and women, rousing them to humanity".

"In the beginning was the Word", and the word may make a new beginning.

Tom Palaima is professor of Classics, University of Texas at Austin.



The Anticipatory Corpse: Medicine, Power and the Care of the Dying
By Jeffrey P. Bishop
University of Notre Dame Press
432pp, £31.50
ISBN 9780268022273
Published 15 October 2011

I approached this book with caution. It begins with the story of Nancy, a woman diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, a disease I have witnessed at close quarters and had no wish to reacquaint myself with. Then, in setting out his approach to the philosophy of death and dying, the author makes clear his debt to Michel Foucault, a figure whose work I have always found at one and the same time compelling and intimidating. It is testament to the calibre of Jeffrey Bishop's writing and scholarship that I stayed the course and was glad to have done so.

Everyone should be interested in death, and as such the readership for this work should be wide. However, the book is first and foremost a much-needed contribution to the intellectual canon of modern bioethics, and as such it will be of most interest and value to those whose work entails the practice or critique of modern medicine.

Having said this, Bishop's experience as a physician and his personal qualities shine through, and even when he is dealing with the more theoretical aspects of his enquiry, one feels that he remains connected to Nancy and many others who have turned to him for help and guidance. Bishop is true to Foucault's historical mode of analysis and more committed to deconstruction than constructive argument. Indeed, in the final pages of the book there are no less than a dozen question marks, the most significant coming right at the end when he asks: "Might it not be