

Extra-territorial: papers on literature and the language revolution. George Steiner. (Faber and Faber, £2.00.)

Readers suspicious of commercialism when hardback collections of papers appear so recently after their first appearance need have no fears about this one. Steiner has taken ten of his essays, written between 1968 and 1970, and turned them into a neat and coherent whole. His basic argument is clearly stated, and prodded from a number of different angles - always supported with a wealth of background reading and detailed textual comment. It is essentially an argument for explanations and order in human experience 'ex lingua'.

The argument develops something like this. Steiner asserts that the coding and transmission of ordered information is central to man: 'to speak of the generation and condition of language is to speak of that of man'(xii). Man has become aware of his own linguisticity, as the central characteristic of his species ('homo loquens', as some say); and moreover this is a recent phenomenon, arising out of the post first world war crises in Europe. It is, in effect, a language revolution, and it can be illustrated by looking at the new interest in and study of language in all areas of human endeavour. To provide a focus for this concept, Steiner introduces the idea of extra-territoriality, explained in the ^{foreword}~~preface~~ and the first essay - the emergence of linguistic 'unhousedness' in great writers. Language defines the human, and a language defines the individual; the writer is a special master of his language, and most writers work within and through a single language; thus when great writers begin to operate with many languages, with apparently equal facility, so that it becomes impossible often to say what their linguistic 'home' is, Steiner views the emergence of this phenomenon as of particular significance. 'A great writer driven from language to language by social upheaval and war is an apt symbol for the age of the refugee'(11), and a reflex

of the language revolution as a whole.

Steiner supports his argument thus far by a detailed consideration of Nabokov, Borges and Beckett, the first three essays of the book. From here, he moves to more general matters. There are two main essays, one on the nature of human language in general, and one on the nature of linguistics - the views of Noam Chomsky in particular. There are some nice footnotes in the latter containing Steiner's comments on Chomsky's comments (in the footnotes) on Steiner's comments (in the paper) about Chomsky. There then follows three papers in which the perspectives get broader and broader: one on language and literature, one on literature and culture, and one on culture and science. We began with the cosmopolitan, and we end with the cosmic; but throughout runs the same theme: 'all identity is active statement' (59); all models, attitudes, frameworks are ultimately correlatable via language; there are 'lines of internal relation and reciprocity' between all disciplines, literature and language, science and art, social theory and literature, philosophy and the life sciences...

Strangely, the world-view stops there. I would have thought that Steiner would have noticed at some point or other how relevant recent trends in religious studies are for his general argument. He does say (xii) 'there is no inevitable merit in rejecting the religious or metaphysical reaches of the argument', but in effect this is what he does. Theologians are conspicuous by their absence from the Index; but there is a great deal in common between Steiner and, say, Walter Ong ('The presence of the word') or Lonergan. It is a pity, as some consideration of the matters currently being discussed about mythological expression and the like would have deepened the range of his argument considerably.

It is the breadth of Steiner's coverage and illustration which is so impressive, and which makes one take very seriously an argument which might

otherwise seem naive. Inevitably, the wide-ranging discussion gives rise to simplifications, idiosyncratic definitions, partial pictures, and what-not. It would not be difficult for a professional linguist to pick Steiner up on a number of technical points, and perhaps scholars from other disciplines will feel the same. To look too closely at the trees, however, would be to miss seeing the compelling parallels between disciplines and viewpoints which provide the main justification for Steiner's having built a wood in the first place. I do not think any of the linguistic quibbles, for instance, are crucial to his argument.

Except one. Steiner thinks of linguistic unhousedness as recent and restricted, a reflection of a specifically European revolution. But is it? Parts of Europe are exceptional in having developed highly monolingual communities: most cultures are multi-lingual, or multi-dialectal, at least. Is the writer (or the literary creator, allowing for oral literatures, etc.) as a linguistic polymath all that new, in fact? In the absence of any real analyses of the literatures of multi-lingual communities, it is probably premature to say that he is.

David Crystal