Strange conjunctions

On literary critic George Steiner receiving the Truman Capote Lifetime Achievement Award

Connoisseurs of pretentious fatuousness owe a great deal to the literary critic George Steiner. For over thirty years, this self-declared polymath has provided them with one of their choicest specimens of pomposity. Rarely has nature united so much preening self-satisfaction with such prodigies of academic double-talk. Mr. Steiner has even gone so far as to bestow titles like *After Babel* on his books—a label so perfectly descriptive of everything George Steiner stands for that many experts prefer it even to *Errata*, the deliciously apt title of his recent autobiography. (Sample passage, about his time as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago: "The compaction, the density of encounter at Chicago was formidable. In my twelve months as an undergraduate..." Only twelve months, George! *Mais oui!* ) For those whose hobbies include collecting stories about Mr. Steiner’s absurdities, it is a great sorrow that Max Beerbohm cannot make a return visit in order to provide us with a caricature of the master at work.

It seemed like a just compensation, then, when it was announced that Mr. Steiner was the winner of the $100,000 Truman Capote Lifetime Achievement Award. The conjunction of George Steiner and Truman Capote—who in his own way was almost as fey as Mr. Steiner is *irdis* special. And the fact that the award was established in memory of Newton Arvin—the Smith English professor who fell madly in love with Truman Capote—makes the award as exquisite as sighting a dodo on the manicured lawns of King’s College, Cambridge, one of the very many exalted institutions with which Mr. Steiner has been said to be associated.