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Review of *Real Presences* by George Steiner

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Real Presences. By George Steiner. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 236 pages. \$12.95 (paper).

Real Presences is about the human encounter with the aesthetic (meaning literature, art, architecture, sculpture, and especially music). For Steiner, the aesthetic encounter is “inextricably enmeshed” with the theological and metaphysical questions of human existence; it’s all about the human encounter (or lack of encounter) with the transcendent (p. 59). Steiner provides a philosophy of aesthetics and aesthetic response that is convincing, but he does much more. His treatment of aesthetics also provides a grammar through which he addresses religious experience in terms of the aesthetic.

Steiner characterizes the waiting and the human condition as “Sabbatarian,” waiting necessarily between the “Good Friday” of present suffering in the world and the anticipated “Sunday” of fulfilled hope (pp. 231–232). In the meantime, we wait. Steiner explains that “The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh

which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savour of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man" (p. 232). For Steiner, true aesthetic experience seems indistinguishable from religious experience. True aesthetic experience reveals ultimate meaning in life.

The aesthetic encounter (or lack of encounter) is the specific focus of Steiner's work. He considers the obstructions to aesthetic encounter, and the vital dynamics of true aesthetic encounter. The true aesthetic encounter will draw the person into contact with a "real presence" that possesses its own freedom, otherness from the subject, immediacy, and meaning beyond the subject's understanding or theoretical categories. Steiner likens this encounter to a receptive welcome offered to a special guest (pp. 146, 166). The host must respect the freedom and otherness of the guest, and be open to another whose identity and meaning are not fully understood. This indeterminacy entails risk and a willingness to embrace uncertainty. But the risk and uncertainty must be accepted before relationship with the guest is possible. The good host must exercise trust (p. 156). Similarly, the one who would welcome aesthetic encounter must refrain from trying to predicate exact understandings, theories, and categories on the freedom and otherness of the experience encountered.

Unfortunately, Steiner urges, there is much in human nature and human society that blocks the true aesthetic encounter. Steiner notes the human tendency to "flinch" in the face of the immediate and mysterious in the aesthetic (p. 49), and to "crave remission from direct encounter with the 'real presence' or the 'real absence of that presence'" (p. 39). Our anesthesia, Steiner explains, is provided by the "secondary city" of reviews, critiques, secondary and tertiary texts. Steiner opens his book with the parable of a community "from which the reviewer and critic have been banished" (p. 5). In the context of this parable of a republic without the parasitical secondary, Steiner explains the obstructions that come between people and the immediacy of aesthetic experience. Steiner explains that "Like sleepwalkers, we are guarded by the numbing drone of the journalistic, of the theoretical, from the often harsh, imperious radiance of sheer presence" (p. 49).

Journalism provides a "monotone of graphic urgency" and a "false immediacy" that actually buffers us from aesthetic experience (pp. 27–28). Steiner notes the "peculiar dialectic" whereby journalism directs the subject toward the aesthetic while simultaneously distancing the subject from the experience and defusing the mystery of the aesthetic presence (pp. 28–29). Conversation about the aesthetic is possible in this situation; but there is no risk, no vulnerability, no trust, no real availability for either the journalistic critic or the one who receives the journalistic review. The aesthetic encounter is thwarted, and the subject becomes a "patron" who may then "patronize" the arts (p. 29).

Secondary and tertiary education, Steiner explains, may likewise serve to relegate the aesthetic to the realm of "decorum" and social convention instead of "the sphere of commitment" (p. 67). Steiner also states that the potential for immediate aesthetic encounter in the present may also be diminished by critical consensus. In this regard, Steiner notes the estimate that "of all 'classical' music performed publicly, recorded and broadcast in the West, nearly ninety per cent predates 1900" (p.

66). Critical consensus of what is "classical" can elbow out new possibilities for musical experience.

In contrast to the anesthetic buffer of journalism, Steiner describes the condition of vulnerability and availability to aesthetic experience relative to the child as subject (p. 190). Using a spatial analogy, Steiner notes that the child offers an "open door" to the "day and night visitants out of the imaginary"; and "Wardrobes stand open to unicorns" (p. 190). Steiner adds that "The story told to a child, the tale read, the ballad committed, perhaps unawares, to memory, are taken to heart. Literally" (p. 190). The child's heart is open to aesthetic experience. The child trusts. The child epitomizes humanity as "*Homo ludens*, a 'playing animal'" (p. 131), because the child is available to the immediacy of aesthetic experience without the felt need to impose order or understanding.

Steiner admits that the child's openness has inevitable risks. The child's vulnerability can be abused. But Steiner concludes that the risks "must be run" because "if the child is left empty of texts, in the fullest sense of that term, he will suffer an early death of the heart and of the imagination" (p. 191). Implicitly, that death of heart and imagination is the condition of most adults who cannot experience the immediacy of the aesthetic. Steiner is also consistent with the warning voiced by Jesus in Mark 10:15 that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it." In effect, Steiner urges us to engage aesthetic experience with the trust, openness and vulnerability of a child.

Steiner also urges that the true aesthetic encounter will mean a transformative change in the subject. When immediate aesthetic experience has penetrated to personal depths, it changes everything. The perspective becomes different. Steiner explains that "The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most 'ingressive', transformative summons available to human experiencing" (p. 143). In this regard, he uses the imagery of the Annunciation to note that "the small house of our cautionary being" will be "no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before" if "we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit" (p. 143). We must not simply observe and report on aesthetic experience (like a journalist or literary critic). Aesthetic experience invites us into encounter that penetrates our being and transforms our identity. Steiner explains that "the 'otherness' which enters into us makes us other" (p. 188). Steiner's emphasis on ultimate trust and the change of life (ethics) resulting from aesthetic encounter has certain parallels with the theology of H. Richard Niebuhr.

Steiner also recognizes that the "real presence" of immediate aesthetic encounter is formed from ordinary elements—sounds arranged in a particular sequence, smudges of paint on a canvas, characters (meaning letters, words) on a sheet of paper. Steiner perceives the transcendent breaking in through the ordinary in an almost sacramental way. Aesthetic experiences are rooted in the immanent, "the twanging of gut or the weight of wind on the reeds," but "they do not stop there" (p. 227). The finite can open into the infinite, and the written characters can take on the character and presence of a Jack Falstaff or Anna Karenina who can be encountered in immediate aesthetic experience (p. 212). The sum can be so much greater than the (physical) total of the parts. In the immediacy of aesthetic experience, Steiner

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urges, we encounter the transcendent that speaks to us and transforms us in our human condition.

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