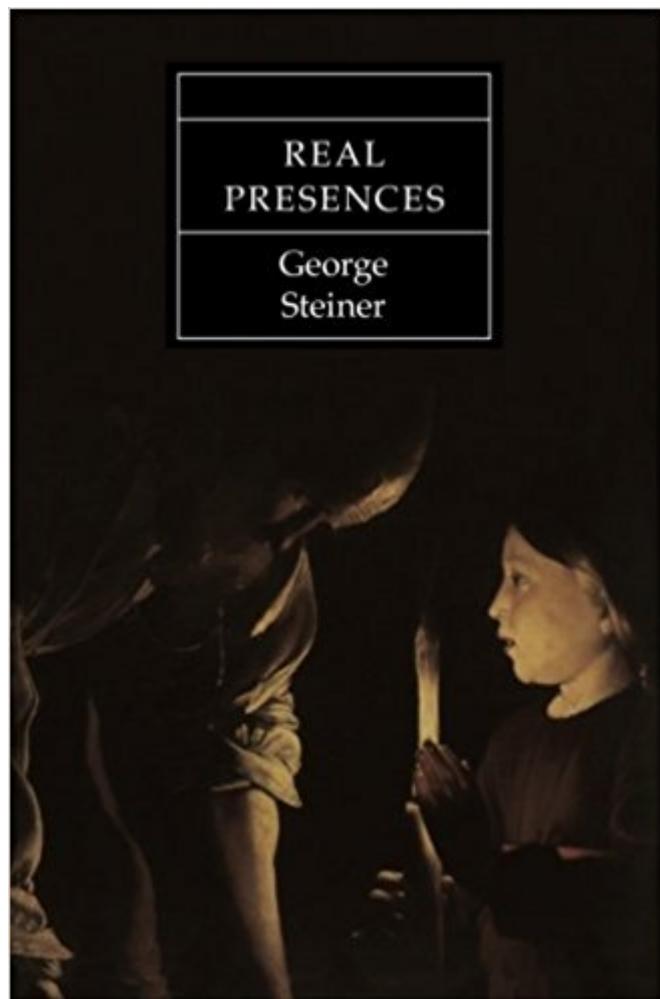


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Real Presences



Synopsis

Can there be major dimensions of a poem, a painting, a musical composition created in the absence of God? Or, is God always a real presence in the arts? Steiner passionately argues that a transcendent reality grounds all genuine art and human communication."A real tour de force. . . . All the virtues of the author's astounding intelligence and compelling rhetoric are evident from the first sentence onward."•Anthony C. Yu, *Journal of Religion*

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Customer Reviews

Steiner asserts moral and metaphysical issues are the basis of all art and that our experience of meaning in music, painting and literature presupposes the existence of God as a "necessary possibility." "Dense, difficult, rewarding, this passionately argued essay ranges fluently over aesthetics, linguistics, philosophy, post-structuralism, the range of Western culture," said PW.

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In this dense, prolix book, critic, linguist, novelist, polymath Steiner holds that in the creation of art (especially music), and in its experiencing, there is a fundamental encounter with a "real presence" and that, in fact, it is this transcendent reality that grounds all genuine art and human communication. He does not so much argue this in the traditional manner as give a "transcendental argument" a la Kant: since so much literature and so many literary figures attest to the thesis, it must be true. Because of its lack of discursive argument, this difficult book will be dissatisfying to

philosophers and largely impenetrable to the general reader. But sophisticated readers looking for highly learned literary criticism will find much here to ponder.- Leon H. Brody, U.S. Office of Personnel Management Lib., Washington, D.C. Copyright 1989 Reed Business Information, Inc.
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If you love language, you will love this book. It will open so many more authors and ideas to you that you will give up reading fluff and inelegant "stuff," just not enough time for the good stuff. Please read the book through without so much stopping to analyze each word. Get the gist the first time through or the first and second times, and then go through word for word. You need to get the overall picture, concept, "vibe," and then you can drill deep. It isn't as daunting as you fear. Read, read, read, and then you will find you do get the idea, you get it. If you go word by word FIRST, you will stop short of the end.

This small but complicated book is an effort to explore the deepest questions confronting human creativity. Steiner begins by seeking to remove artistic expression from the domain of science and scientific impulses that are so evident in post-modern criticism. He concedes that language is under attack -- and from many different directions. The 20th century brought us many intellectual movements that sought to divorce us from the word -- psychology, which sought truth in dreams and fantasies; linguistic theory that sought to isolate signs from meaning; deconstructionism, which suggests that language, being so imprecise a tool of communication, is therefore not useful in an exploration for truth. Authors themselves, so this argument goes, cease to matter. Then there is the deterioration of language, so stock with cliches and predictable usage that rob it of its power and vitality. Of course, all of these claims are interesting, some even contain some truth, but Steiner contends that somewhere between nihilism and the dogmatic notion that texts are sacred and final (not open to disagreement and discussion), there is a common sense middle ground. Human experience is complex and it can unfold in many ways, at different levels. Music is a common thread in human emotional life -- it is part of artistic expression. Words, while not always well used, still have the power to move us -- enabling us to give directions, buy groceries, build bridges or express feelings of deep love or loss. The masters of language and art shake us at our core, force us to examine more deeply our humanity, and reshape our reality even as we are unaware of their formative power. Steiner then argues that it is the need to find meaning in existence, to explore the borderland between life and death, that literature and artistic expression are rooted in the transcendent. He is not so much saying that God infuses all art, but rather that the search for God

and the need to create as God creates is the powerful moving force in human creation. (It is here that he makes the controversial claim that women, because they bring life into the world, are not as driven as men to express themselves creatively....) This is not an easy read. Some sections had to be read several times. In this case, I would agree with Steiner that my reading is at best an educated glimpse at his argument. Steiner writes beautifully in places, but his style is thick with nuance and references that are often hard to follow. However, those interested in resisting post-modern forces that threaten to fragment the human could not ask for a more impressive thinker to guide them through the murky lower regions that make up the hell of modern criticism. He will then lead you, if not to the *paradiso*, at least to a place where art, literature and poetry still move the human heart.

When a violinist complained that a passage taxed his skill, Beethoven roared back: "do you think I am worried about a lousy fiddle when the Spirit is speaking to me?" Be it doctrinaire or otherwise, it is startling how many of the great composers - those "sages standing in God's holy fire", ascribed to some sort of belief in the Almighty: Mozart, Bruckner, Beethoven, Haydn, Schumann, Wagner(yes), Bax, Liszt, Tchaikovsky and a certain gentleman called Johann Sebastian Bach. Ambiguity is to be found in the likes of Schubert, Vaughan Williams, Mahler and Brahms. The only composer who was staunchly an atheist belongs to the lower ranks: Delius. Many such composers were conscious of their vocation (what a word to use in this context): Leopold Mozart described his son as the "miracle that God had allowed to be born in Salzburg" and his words were later re-echoed by the progeny; when accosted by his legion of critics, Bruckner retorted: "They want me to write differently. Certainly I could but I must not. God has chosen me from thousands and given me, of all people, this talent. It is to Him that I must give account. How then would I stand there before Almighty God if I followed the others and not Him?" I am always surprised that in discussions as to God's existence, their testimony is not drawn upon more often - not so much for what they might say (which would be incoherent in certain instances) but for their output. What does the Bruckner Eighth say about the cosmos and our place therein ? Surely the beginning of the Beethoven Ninth is more insightful on the events that occurred some 14.3 billion years ago than any theory by a propeller head? What truth is evident in the last movement of the *Waldstein* or its counterpart in Opus 101? And what of the darkness? Surely Sibelius & Brahms in their Fourth Symphonies are authoritative? Can the horror of Auschwitz be encompassed by the Bruckner Ninth? And what deeper reality is evoked - not depicted - by Victoria in the *Agnus Dei* of his *Ave Maris Stella* mass? To paraphrase Dostoevsky: God sets us nothing but riddles - and symphonies. Indeed, at its most profound, musicology looks

dangerously like theology. Which brings us to the thesis of this book: be it music, painting, poetry, sculpture and writing - why do we have an experience of the transcendental in our encounters with great art? Moreover, what underwrites the experience? If, as Pythagoras postulated, there is an underlying rationality to the universe - best expressed in the *Disocuri of Music and Mathematics* - why are we are attuned to it and to what end? This is an intellectual tour de force. Steiner will make you sweat. Keeping apace with the author is equivalent to running a marathon. Quite rightly he allocates much space to the testimony of music, approached allegorically, in addition to the other arts. He cannot avoid using the word 'Real Presence' to encompass the resultant experience. The metaphor of the Burning Bush is also deployed: to be set alight but not consumed. Therein lies the real game. Richard Dawkins, if you are reading this review (hah!), the likes of Steiner are your real adversaries - not some yokel from the Deep South who believes in Adam & Eve. Stephen Hawkins is more acute: he is deeply suspicious of 'woolly mysticism' and rightly so. Caravaggio's 'Conversion on the Way to Damascus' in the Santa Maria del Popolo is not easily refuted as an experience. Both gentlemen should avoid Parsifal. In short, this is a magisterial study by one of the thinkers of our time. It is not an easy read and nor should it be. In many instances, George 'kicks sand in one's face' with his multi-layered references but this is not done gratuitously: with time running out, one has to delve wider & deeper. PS - Steiner is not a Catholic, however much 'transubstantiation' might appeal to him aesthetically. He belongs broadly to the faith of his forefathers. It says something about the depth of his syncretism that readers could make this assumption.

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