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The art of presence: The case for presence after deconstruction

Abstract:

Ever since its emergence in the 1960s, Jacques Derrida's critical strategy of deconstruction has fundamentally challenged the metaphysics of presence in the signifying structures inherent within the Western philosophical tradition. Following this challenge, the notion of the 'presence' of essential meaning beyond signification, and of an other that is more than an absence, has been troubled, if not overturned, by the binary biases of metaphysical philosophy, which Derrida has sought to reveal.

In the face of Derrida's methods of open-ended play and insidious subversion, persuasive works engaging with deconstruction in defence of presence have been few. One such work is George Steiner's underappreciated *Real Presences* (1989), a searching critical meditation in which Steiner posits the need, today, for a 'wager' on transcendence. Moreover, Steiner contends that any encounter with art, or with the other, is in fact predicated on such a wager. Language and art exist because of the other, he asserts and, until recently, the source of the other has been understood as a realm of transcendent presence, of essential meaning. In this argument for a 'wager' on 'real presence', or, at least, a 'real absence' in the realm of art – both in the art-act by the artist and in the affective aesthetic encounter of art by a viewer, listener or reader – Steiner acknowledges the necessity of deconstruction's challenge to Western metaphysics' assumptions as to the existence of a meaningful presence and present meaning inherent in the signifying structures within discourse.

Ultimately, Steiner's thesis rests on the premise that, for all the revolutionary achievements of post-structuralism, it has not changed the nature of there being, in the experience of the creation and reception of meaningful works of art, a 'presumption of presence', an opening up to an other that leads ultimately to God (Steiner 1989, 214). As Steiner admits, this is an assertion difficult to prove, yet validation is to be found in the ultimately mysterious phenomenon of the aesthetic encounter. This is the visceral experience, triggered involuntarily in a body encountering the work of art and somehow being moved, on a level so primitive it is beyond ultimate comprehension. It is in this mysterious experience of art, Steiner argues, that the rhetorical mechanisms of deconstruction, and the notion of an ultimate absence at the heart of signification, are tested.

This paper calls for and itself attempts, summarily, a review of Steiner's argument that all serious art is predicated on a wager on presence, considering whether, in light of deconstruction's challenge to presence, the realm of art poses an exception. Finally, this paper argues that the physical experience of the art encounter demands more sustained and directed attention within current literary studies concerning the metaphysics of presence and absence.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

Absence – Aesthetics – Deconstruction – Metaphysics – Presence

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‘There is language, there is art, because there is “the other”’ (Steiner 1989, 137).

So declares George Steiner in his 1989 book-length essay, *Real presences*. In this profound yet seldom-discussed work, Steiner considers the place of art after God. More precisely, he poses the question of what art signifies now that the will of a divine presence has ceased to be assumed, by Western culture at large, to underlie our serious works of creative form. A pivotal point in this receding of presence within Western art and thought is encapsulated in modernism’s mournful reckoning with Enlightenment ideals, and the illusions inherent within Western cultural and aesthetic traditions.

Necessarily, Steiner’s inquiry is contextualised within, and made answerable to, the aftermath of a philosophical revolution – that of deconstruction’s challenge to the metaphysical presumption of presence, of meaning within and beyond the signifying structures of Western thought. At the heart of *Real presences* is Steiner’s proposition that despite this challenge, even today any genuine understanding of language, music or the visual and theatrical arts is predicated on the possibility of, that is, a ‘wager’ on this very presence. As Steiner (1989, 121) notes, such a presence may be ‘theological, ontological or metaphysical’. Further, it may be:

...that of God...of Platonic ‘Ideas’; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence...of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or Heidegger’s ‘Being’...
(Steiner 1989, 121)

It is the possibility of such a presence that opens the field of meaning within the semantic markers of representation in the poem and the painting, the play and the song. In the pre-modern world, the sense of a real meaning inhabiting the sign was guaranteed by God. A sense of meaning and transcendence is pervasive in the Orthodox icons of Byzantine, in which gilded saints possess the viewer with an eternal gaze; in the grave and majestic devotional scenes of Giotto; in Piero della Francesca’s mesmerising fresco of the resurrection. To encounter these images is to bear witness to the sense of stillness granted by faith. In literature, such faith took Dante to the allegorical heights of *La divina commedia*, infused Milton’s *Paradise lost* with ferocious intensity and possessed William Blake to create illuminated manuscripts of mystical brilliance. From the 1870s to the 1930s, such faith was corroded by existential doubt. Modernism’s crisis of the sign cleaved apart the previous unity of word and world (Steiner’s phrase), creating a rift made redolent in philosophy and art – Mallarmé, Malevich, Cage, Nietzsche – marked by a sense of loss. Art testifying to this sense of loss and absence has variously borne a sense of the elegiac, such as in the images of Odilon Redon or the narrative tone in Thomas Hardy, and the irreverence, cynicism or anger seen in Dada or Artaud. In this aftermath of God, art persists, Steiner posits, because the door to presence is not yet finally closed. As he declares (1989, 99) of Mallarmé, in art after God, we are not in the realm of ‘real presence’ so much as a ‘real absence’. Ultimately, asserts Steiner, it is in the enduring phenomenon of aesthetic experience in the art encounter, which offers the most profound testament to the idea that the human experience of created form is necessarily grounded in an openness or ‘gamble’ on the other, on transcendence, on the possibility of meaning’s presence within signification. To encounter, in a

condition of freedom, a poem, painting or sonata, is to open one's being to what may come, to visitations of the other. In this sense, 'art reception' implies also the receiving of guests, of callers – of 'welcome', as Steiner suggests (1989, 146–50).

This paper, within the limitations of brevity, calls for a redress of the relative paucity of sustained scholarly attention directed to Steiner's central thesis in *Real presences*, from its publication in 1989 to the present. Focusing on the aesthetic encounter with literature, I will discuss key aspects of this thesis in relation to deconstruction, locating fundamental points at which the postulates of each not only differ but converge, while arguing that the phenomenon of the art encounter deserves review within studies concerning the metaphysics of presence and absence.

It is with the experimental poetry of Mallarmé, in which the play of sound and visual form of words on the page were so radically foregrounded within the poem's semantic structure, that Steiner (1989, 93) discerns a vital shift, a veritable 'revolution of spirit' in the West, and the pinpoint of modernism itself. This revolution is that of the word, the sign, the semantic marker. It is the departure from the time of Logos, of meaning in signification granted by divine presence, by belief in philosophical essence. It is the severing 'of the covenant between word and world', of language set adrift from external reference, the emergence of an irreconcilable gap between sign and referent (Steiner 1989, 93, 94). This time is that of the 'a-Logos', of 'after-Word' or 'epilogue'. With the loss of the Logos, however, comes the restoration of the vital energies of language, the primal boundlessness of metaphor, a renaissance of generative play on the level of the sign (Steiner 1989, 98). From 'real presence' comes 'real absence', and, as in Mallarmé, the recognition that it is absence which animates the sign. Says Steiner (1989, 96), 'the truth of the word is the absence of the world'. This recognition gave rise not only to the pervasive grief of Modernism, but to its vitalising irreverence for conservative tradition and a prodigious flowering of artistic experimentation.

In advancing his argument for a wager on presence, Steiner presents an incisive, if summary, critique of Jacques Derrida's methodology of deconstruction in specific relation to the art encounter. Before considering this critique further, it is necessary to discuss briefly two key concepts in Derrida's work – *différance* and *supplementarity*, advanced in Derrida's 1967 *Of grammatology* (among other publications), his canonical study revealing the bias in Western tradition of speech over writing, while positing for a new 'science' of writing.

Derrida's theory of the supplement emerges from his deconstructive reading of Rousseau's 'Essay on the origin of languages' (1781), through which he identifies the correspondences between masturbation and writing, as 'supplements' to the more immediate, interpersonal acts of sexual intercourse and speech. The supplement is closely tied to his important theory of 'différance', a French derivation suggestive of difference and deferment simultaneously, connoting the difference and distance inherent in all signification, with respect to the world of the signified. As described by Barbara Johnson (1981, x) in the lucid introduction to her 1981 English translation of Derrida's 1971 *Dissemination*, Derrida's reading of Rousseau reveals 'a curious bifurcation within the values of writing and masturbation with respect to the desire of

presence'. That is, Derrida considers the equation between Rousseau's relation to women and what he sees as the necessary non-satisfaction of representation; the absence at the heart of the signifier being the condition by which desire comes into being. In the words of Derrida (cited in Johnson 1981, 143), 'différance produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible'. Similarly, Rousseau's preference of autoeroticism over intercourse with a live woman can be perceived as a means of privileging the powers of the mind in projecting the image of woman, an image more potent for its situation within an abiding absence of any real, singular woman. The power of the imagined woman, who is boundless and all pervasive, is predicated on the lack of a real one. Further, as Johnson notes (1981, xii), confrontation with a real woman, in her presence, would also be a confrontation with *différance*. Like *différance*, the term substitute has a dual meaning, as that which adds, and that which subtracts. Building upon Rousseau's own use of the term in relation to masturbation and writing, Derrida conceives of the supplement as a paradox of presence and absence within written and spoken linguistic signification, where there is always an oscillation of contradiction behind the implied, immediate 'meaning' of a sign. As summarised by Johnson (1981, xii), in Rousseau's supplement, 'writing and masturbation may *add to* something that is already present, in which case they are *superfluous*, AND/OR they may *replace* something, in which case they are *necessary*', and what Derrida is at pains to show is the contradictory interconnectedness of these two conceptions of addition and replacement within the signification of presence and absence, the strange 'doubling' ever-present within the signifying structure. Thus Derrida's re-formulation of the notion of supplementarity enacts a careful critique of the metaphysical assumptions inherent within Rousseau's text.

In a world in which divine presence has receded, argues Steiner (1989, 120), deconstruction's challenge to metaphysical valuations has been a necessary one. Moreover, the positions of Steiner and Derrida converge in their recognition of the sign's dependence on an absent signified in order to function; of the differential, contrasting structure by which the chain of signification affords relative and intelligible meaning; and of the way in which signification will always escape and exceed the sign. It is, perhaps, the points at which they differ which prove more difficult to define.

At issue for Steiner is the notion that deconstruction has anything useful to say about art, addressing, as it does, philosophy rather than literature (Steiner 1989, 128)¹. Further, Steiner notes (1989, 128) that canonical deconstructionist criticism is nearly always limited to readings of other theoretical texts and that, in those cases of exception where it is applied to primary texts such as works of imaginative literature, these texts are invariably the more obscure or secondary works of great artists. Moreover, Steiner draws attention to what he identifies as deconstruction's neglect to attend convincingly to the question of why, in the face of what he describes as its 'postulate of insignificance and progressive cancellation or erasure', art endures at all – before acknowledging the way in which the very nature of deconstruction deflects such a question (1989, 131–2). In fact, for Steiner, the (il)logic of deconstruction is indeed irrefutable within its own terms of rhetorical play and multiple readings (1989,

123). Further complicating Steiner's own argument is the unavoidably tenuous nature of any claim staked on epistemologies of direct experience (specifically, here, the tentative critical field formally known as 'reception theory') when that experience is as subjective and unquantifiable as that of a human being's with a work of art – regardless of the various appeals to a certain universality within this phenomenon that might be persuasive outside the academy. Works of searching and affecting philosophy have been grounded in such phenomenological investigations – Barthes' *Camera lucida* (1980) comes to mind – and yet how can such works, predicated on certain metaphysical assumptions regarding presence, be made answerable to deconstruction? Of course, as Steiner notes, deconstruction itself is not exempt from a certain opposition of method and means in its employment of critical, logocentric language in its critique of interpretive criticism. However, with its spirit of irony and play, deconstruction embraces self-consciously such complications².

Even in the age of absence, to cite Derrida's epigram, 'the intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God' – an absent, deferred or withheld presence that now haunts our grammar and expels the notion of an intelligible meaning transcending the signs of speech and writing (cited in Steiner 1989, 119). In light of this 'semiotics of nihilism or nullity' (Steiner 1989, 133), Steiner poses an urgent question, that is:

...whether a hermeneutics and a reflex of valuation – the encounter with meaning in the verbal sign, in the painting, in the musical composition, and the assessment of the quality of such meaning in respect of form – can be made intelligible, can be made answerable to the existential facts, if they do not imply, if they do not contain, a postulate of transcendence. (Steiner 1989, 134)

Ultimately, Steiner posits that, when even God's (or the other's) possibility cannot be granted, the height to which human expression can reach in art is irreconcilably diminished (1989, 229). Just as he poses the question of what would be should history, culture, civilisation's debt to the other be called in, Steiner considers too the vision of a 'utopian' future in which such a question would be incomprehensible, for the reason that the ancient human instinct to art, to representation in 'the image of God' had receded (1989, 134). As Steiner (1989, 224) notes, in the unity of word and world before the Fall, 'There was, presumably, no need of books or of art in Eden', and the sign thereafter, as described famously by Derrida (1976, 283), has always been 'a sign of the Fall'.

Within the scope of literary and textual studies, Steiner's consideration of the primal immediacy of art's creation and reception, and his suppositions in relation to a persistent sense of the other underwriting these operations, appear worthy of renewed attention. In light of the relatively recent emergence of hauntology, mourning, elegy, the uncanny and sublimity as discrete fields of study within literary scholarship, in which the text is predominantly explored, on a semantic level, as a 'site' for these phenomena of the other, a reading of Steiner offers fertile ground for a more rigorous application, within these fields, of aesthetic reception theory. (Steiner's observation (1989, 177) in *Real presences* of this field's continued focus on aesthetics within a conservative historical focus, remains relevant today.) The areas of literary inquiry

mentioned above are energised by an understanding of the mobilising and generative nature of the absence at the heart of the sign, of the word ‘tree’ as an arbitrary marker for a referent from which it is ineffably estranged – for it is in that uncertain space that the figures of language are summoned to form the poem, the play, the novel. Writing of mourning literature and the often ‘elusive’ task of expressing mourning in light of the relation of language to death, William Watkin in *On mourning* (2004, 3) acknowledges the ‘difficult conflict between absence, which is about lacking physical presence, and its representations which, by necessity, must involve a physical mark or signifier’. This is a conflict that also resonates within texts in which haunting and spectrality can be seen to figure. It must be noted also here, that Derrida’s own *Specters of Marx* (1993), an investigation into Marxism and spectrality, can be seen as a major propelling force in the development of hauntology as a field of literary inquiry, although further discussion of this influential and prodigious work is beyond the reach of this paper.

There appears scope within these fields, however, for a greater acknowledgement and investigation of the visceral physical dimension in which these phenomena operate on the level of the reader’s (or for that matter, the writer’s) body. Mourning, the elegiac, uncanniness and sublimity are all physical sensations. Haunting is not just a critical paradigm for a semantic or thematic analysis of Henry James or Rilke, but an immediate experience visited upon the reader’s body involuntarily, through her communion with the text in which a sense of ‘nearness’ to an other which is both there and not there, and certainly not ‘here’, is felt. Says Steiner (1989, 188), ‘The “otherness” which enters into us makes us other’. Steiner is only too conscious of the current reluctance among scholars of aesthetics to engage in potentially embarrassing, sentimental exaltations regarding the mysterious, ineffable and subjective phenomenon of art reception (1989, 177). The very fact seems indicative of current culture in the time of ‘epilogue’ (Steiner 1989, 228). Even when, as Steiner (1989, 201) suggests, our reckoning with the ‘radically inexplicable presence...of the created’ strikes at the essence of what it is to be human, when all that can be said of aesthetic experience, that ‘ontological encounter between freedoms’, is instinctive and sensate, it is suspect – ‘prey’, he suggests, ‘for *both* positivism *and* deconstruction’ (my italics). And yet, as Steiner (1989, 214) asserts, ‘there is no mind-set in respect of consciousness and of ‘reality’ which does not make at least one leap into the dark’.

In ‘recent art and thought’ Steiner observes the pervasiveness of:

...a negative theism, a particularly vivid sense of God’s absence or, to be precise, of His recession. The ‘other’ has withdrawn... [If] a Giorgione landscape enact(s) the epiphany of a real presence...a Malevich...reveal(s)... [an] encounter with a ‘real absence’. So, we have seen, do post-structuralism and deconstruction. Within Derridean readings lies a “zero theology” of the “always absent”. The Ur-text is there, but made insignificant by a primordial act of absence (Steiner 1989, 229).

In this argument, the time we have been inhabiting since the break between sign and referent, word and world, this time of divinity’s redolent and ‘real’ absence, is one in which the residue of the grammars of positivist, humanist faith in the divine guarantee of meaning within the sign and within works of created form, is still remembered and

felt, haunting us on the ever-‘present’ level of language, in, as Steiner (1989, 230–31) writes, ‘our references to ‘higher’ things, to the impalpable and mythical which are still incised in our grammars, which are still the ontological guarantors of the arcs of metaphor’.

Maurice Blanchot, in *The space of literature* (1955), a meditation on literary experience, evokes repeatedly the fatal instant in the Ovidian myth of Orpheus and Eurydice when, during their ascent from the Underworld back to earth, Orpheus is at the last moment unable to resist breaking the one condition set by the gods for Eurydice’s return: that he not look back at her until they reach earth. In looking back, Orpheus forfeits his wife forever. It is by the force of art, his beautiful music, that Orpheus is granted the chance to descend to Eurydice, who represents for him, says Blanchot (1982, 171), ‘the furthest that art can reach’, the ‘point toward which art and desire, death and night, seem to tend’. Orpheus had to look back, suggests Blanchot (1982, 172), for, in truth, he wants her not in life, but ‘in her distance...in the plentitude of her death’. Orpheus’s destiny is to sing of Eurydice, not to possess her, for the existence of the song depends on her absence.

Steiner’s mournful speculations lead him to the vision of a day in which there would never be a song, for Orpheus would have lost even his memory of Eurydice; a day when the ghosts of God we still summon in speech are entirely forgotten, having receded without trace from both grammar and imagination. What would such a day look like? Much of what endures in art ‘already looks to the past’ (Steiner 1989, 231). Steiner can of course only draw on instinct, in supposing that when not even the absence of God is deeply felt, art creation as we know it will no longer be tenable; ‘certain dimensions of thought and creativity [will be]...no longer attainable’ (Steiner 1989, 229–31).

This has been a necessarily cursory review of what is an exquisitely nuanced and intricate argument. What I hope to have illuminated, however, albeit tentatively, is that Steiner’s questions, as posed in *Real presences* – if unfashionable, if virtually impossible to adumbrate, to address or to evidentially conclude using any standard hermeneutic or otherwise systematic method of interpretative arts criticism – are urgent ones. They are questions which current literary philosophy must answer to, and be tested by, in a spirit admitting of their gravity – even if answers are not forthcoming, or only conceivable within the very terms of metaphor and allegory, which are the ghostly figures at issue. As Steiner shows us, the effort is worthwhile.

Endnotes

1. Current models of arts criticism are themselves the locus of utmost concern for Steiner in *Real presences*, in view of what he sees as the fallacy that scientific methods concerned with evidential proof can be co-opted into any discourse concerning aesthetics. After all, primary works are themselves works of criticism of a kind that cannot be (sensibly) reduced or totalised, and ‘talk can neither be verified nor falsified in any rigorous sense’ (Steiner 1989, 61).
2. There do exist certain grounds for argument that, in certain of his linkages of deconstructionist thought to nihilism, negative theology and God’s absence, Steiner has to some degree either

misrepresented and/or misunderstood deconstruction in his argument, in the sense that deconstruction does not put forth any positive or finite claim as to God's reality or unreality, but instead critiques the ways in which it is employed in discourse. Similarly, it is arguable that Steiner has not adequately acknowledged the way in which the most sophisticated deconstruction's spirit of play and approach to the literal deconstruction of signification as a 'game', also does so with a full sense of the gravity, the 'stakes', of that game.

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