

Contemporary Humanism

International PhD Program & Research Network

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Dissertation

Christianity as Visitation in George Steiner: towards the Real Presence through a Poetics of Responsible Personhood

ABSTRACT: Though never its main topic, Christianity is a constant presence throughout George Steiner's work. It is significant in relation to all his privileged issues: the Shoah, tragedy, myth, authorship, being, meaning, translation and creation. Nevertheless, its role has never been the focus of a monograph. Through close and selective reading of Steiner's work, this thesis first explores the different significations and contexts in which this uninterrupted dialogue takes place. Often polemical yet productively paradoxical and ambiguous, this dialogue follows an ever-deepening process despite its apparent repetitions, and reaches its climax in the use of the metaphor of the real presence as an answer to deconstruction. However, at the same time, Steiner maintains that Christianity's willingness or capacity to respond to post-Holocaust ethical challenges has been insufficient.

In the second part, we draw attention to another fundamental yet scarcely highlighted concern underlying Steiner's reflection: the question of the life of the literary character. Since Steiner often grounds his critical posture on this epistemological nub thereby associating it to his conception of the real presence, we consider the two aspects in their reciprocal complementarity. The question of the literary character provides the metaphor of the real presence with a referential framework, whereas the latter provides a third dynamic term to the character/person dichotomy. Thus considered, Steiner's conception of the literary character is situated within recent developments of literary theory to which its contribution is deemed heuristically enriching. Weaving together these two fundamental concerns in George Steiner reveals a deep underlying Judeo-Christian worldview, in which presence and personhood are intimately linked. Commenting on a chapter of *Real Presences* in which Steiner personifies the process of meaning we are led to formulate a new metaphor to describe its emergence: visitation. Through dialogue with other philosophers (Derrida, Nancy, Levinas, Marion, Buber), we explore its potential philological, hermeneutical, phenomenological, and even deconstructive implications. As a result, the idea of visitation appears as a transdisciplinary poetics of responsible personhood potentially capable of facing the question on the humanizing function of culture which haunts Steiner. Discussing the Christian tenor of such a poetics in a potential, polyphonic and transdisciplinary, rather than ideological way, we observe how Steiner's perspective has consciously interiorized the truthful and iconic potential of fiction revealed by two fundamental Christian events and doctrines: the Incarnation and the Eucharist.

Research interests / Fields of expertise

Comparative literature

Literary theory
Culture Studies
Philosophy
Theology

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