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Behind, Through and Beyond the Literary Character:
the Person as Real Presence in George Steiner

George Steiner's use of the theological concept of "real presence" in relation to literary meaning is highly problematic. Indeed, it has been sharply criticized by literary scholars, whereas philosophers and theologians, while skeptically underlining the ambiguity deriving from the borrowing, have nonetheless also pointed to its constructive potential. Most of the critiques are addressed to one of his most famous books, *Real Presences*, where the borrowed theological dogma is pluralized in the title. Yet, although references to it are abundantly scattered along the text, no systematical account or explanation of the analogy he thus intends to establish with literary or artistic sense appears in the text. To understand how Steiner uses it, one has to go backwards to his attempt at defining reading in the article " 'Critic'/'Reader' ". He there posits that when we read, literary data can no more be considered objects, but become presences. Each word is not the sign of something preexisting but becomes both the evocation and the manifestation of a surging presence. Reading is thus envisaged as a "transubstantional" activity involving presences, in which literary *data*

> are not "objects" even in a special "aesthetic" category, but "presences", "presentments" whose existential "thereness" (Heidegger's word) relates less to the organic, as it does in Aristotelian and Romantic poetics and theories of art, than it does to the "transubstantional." […] What is implicit is the notion and expression of "real presence." The reader proceeds *as if* the text was the housing of forces and meanings, of meanings of meaning, whose lodgings within the executive verbal form was one of "incarnation." He reads *as if*—a conditionality which defines the "provisional" temper of his pursuit—the singular presence of the life of meaning in the text and work of art was "a real presence" irreducible to analytic summation and resistant to judgment in the sense in which the critic can and must judge. But a presentness, a presence of what?[1]

Before we attempt a tentative answer, let us echo Steiner's question: a presence of what?

[1] George Steiner, " 'Critic'/'Reader' ", New Literary History , Spring, 1979, Vol. 10, No. 3, Anniversary Issue: I (Spring, 1979), p. 440.

As some have suggested before me[2], Steiner's work needs to be read and assessed through the notion of person or personhood in order to answer that question. Although he himself very rarely uses the term we can glimpse its presence in his vitalist conception of the literary character. Indeed, throughout his publications scattered over more than half a century, he insists on repeating that none of the extra-literary interpretative methods that have conceded themselves the right to literary analysis throughout the XXth century (Marxism, linguistics, New Criticism, deconstruction, psychoanalysis) can supply an exhaustive explanation of the ontology of the literary character; neither in terms of the genesis of the literary character within the author nor in terms of his or her enduring existence over a period of time that can long outlast that of a real human life.

According to Steiner, no accurate conception of literary meaning can avoid the question of the ontology of the literary character or *persona*[3]. Yet he himself has never focused on it. Rather, it is an obsession that has more or less explicitly characterized his work since *Tolstoy or Dostoevsky*. In that book, it is through the relationships between the author and his characters that he proceeds to differentiate the poetics of both Russian novelists. In *The Death of Tragedy*, his proclamation of the death of the genre is compensated by an almost lyrical cant of the immortality of dramatic characters. Not even *Antigones* can be termed a study on a particular literary character, since its title most likely refers to the many versions and interpretations — rewritings by playwrights but also by philosophers or translators— of the myth that have been produced. In other words, *Antigones* refers to the literary and artistic works representing the tragic heroin, rather than to the character or the person behind the character herself.

Curiously, Steiner's conception has never been replaced and subsequently valued in the field of literary theory. And although it is a paradox, given the author's affirmed mistrust and skepticism towards literary theory, I would rather suggest that his work makes a positive contribution to literary theory and, beyond, to contemporary humanism. Indeed, especially as far as the question of the literary character is concerned, he takes it beyond the schemes in which it can easily become fossilized.

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[2] See the PhD theses by Jennifer E. Harris (*Flowers of Grace*, University of Toronto, 2000) and Juan Pedro Maldonado Isla (*La frontera de la palabra en el pensamiento de George Steiner,* University of the Holy Cross, Rome, 2006).

[3] Literary character and *persona* do not necessarily refer to the same person. A literary character is a specific kind of literary *persona*, but when we talk of literary *persona* we may also be referring ourselves to the narrator, to the implied reader or to the implied author. The notion therefore needs contextual definition each time it is implemented.

BEYOND THE CHARACTER/PERSON DICHOTOMY

Generally speaking, XXth century literary theory has struggled with the binary opposition character-person, or between a view of the character as a linguistic artefact as opposed to considering the character as person. According to Jannis Fotidis, «characters have long been regarded as fictive people. To understand characters, readers tend to resort to their knowledge about real people. In this framework, an anthropological, biological or psychological theory of persons can also be used in character analysis.»[4] It is against this exogenous approach to literature that formalist, structuralist and textualist approaches have struggled. According to what I would call endogenous criticism, the character is conceived as an assemblage of words or «a paradigm of traits described by words.»[5] Fotidis refers here, among others, to Barthes's *S/Z* (where «one of the codes, "voices", substitutes for person, understood as the web of semes attached to a proper name»[6]) and Lotman, who «describes character as a sum of all binary oppositions to the other characters.»[7] As Fotidis recalls, such an approach to character had already been advocated by the New Criticism. Wellek & Warren[8], for instance, claimed that a character consists only of the words by which it is described or with which the author lets her speak. Earlier, Knights had attempted to cut short the pervasive tendency to treat character presentations as if they were real people with a background beyond their textual existence. With a famous question-title "How many Children had Lady Macbeth?"[9] he succinctly made his charge against all approaches that can commonly be gathered under the notion of *psychologism*. Casting a short glance at the definition of «personnage» first in the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*[10], then in the *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*[11], we get a quick insight into the complexity and ambivalence of the issue. The two editions were published at a distance of twenty-three years and their comparison evinces a change of perspective in their approach, the first one showing

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[4] Jannis Fotidis, "Character", *The living handbook of narratology*, http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de, chap 3.1.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] René Wellek and A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, London: J. Cape, 1949.
[9] Lionel C. Knights, *How many Children had Lady Macbeth?*, New York: Haskell House, 1933.
[10] See Oswald Ducrot and T. Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, Paris: Seuil, 1972, p. 286: "On oublie alors que le problème du personnage est avant tout linguistique, qu'il n'existe pas en dehors des mots, qu'il est un «être de papier»."
[11] See Oswald Ducrot and J.-M Schaeffer, *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, Paris: Seuil, 1995, p. 755: "il existe une relation non contingente entre personnage fictif et **personne**: le *personnage* représente fictivement une *personne*, en sorte que l'activité projective qui nous fait traiter le premier *comme* une personne est essentielle à la création et à la réception des récits."

evidence of structuralist influence with its reluctance to consider the character as a person. On the other hand, the second one emphasizes more willingly the interdependence of character and person. The change is due mainly to the search, since the eighties and the works of Uri Margolin, for a narratological perspective able to cope with the intertwining of the two aspects —character and person—.

By the beginning of the nineties, we have thus become aware that the notion of person is crucial to the creation and reception of fictions. To Vincent Jouve, in a chapter entitled «Le personnage comme personne», this makes no doubt: «[la] réception du personnage comme personne (qu'elle soit continue ou non, plus ou moins évidente selon les récits) est une donnée incontournable de la lecture romanesque. […] L'effet-personne est un des fondements de la lecture romanesque. On peut même se demander si ce n'en est pas l'essence.[12] » The person is thus potentially both effect and essence of literary reception. It is a presence that is both presumed (*behind*), achieved *through* the deciphering of signs which we call reading and that reveals itself as "real" *beyond* its apprehension as fiction.

Back in 1971, responding to the linguistic trend in literary analysis of the time, Steiner already posited this idea. In «Linguistics and Poetics», he defines literature as language in a condition of special use which is one of «total significance». Consequently, even if he concedes that linguistics can give us an insight into the multiple layers of complexity and orders of difficulty involved in this total significance, notwithstanding the fact that the language revolution may have brought us nearer the problem of literary significance, linguistics still falls short in front of the central problem of poetics, that of the literary *persona*:

> We are drawing near, albeit by very small steps, to grasping the dynamics whereby a set of oral or written signals can create characters more 'real' and assuredly more lasting than are our own and the lives of their creators. What enigma of the autonomous vitalities of language lies in Flaubert's bitter outcry that he lay dying whilst Mme Bovary, the petty creature of his verbal labours, would endure?[13]

In other words, it has not seized what is already (approximately eighteen years before *Real Presences*) signified as the core of literary meaning: the happening or manifestation of a real presence within it. Here, the notion of presence is still implicit. Steiner recognizes that our awareness of the artificial linguistic status of characters enhances our knowledge of them but

[12] Vincent Jouve, *L'effet personnage dans le roman*, PUF, pp. 108-109.
[13] George Steiner, «Linguistics and Poetics», in *Extraterritorial. Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution*, London: Faber&Faber, 1972, p. 152.

that there is an apprehensive dimension of their perception as person which inevitably escapes us. Later, the idea is further developed in *Real Presences*:

> We yield rights of possession to the fictions of literature […]. I see no other explanation, be it, in the first instance, psychological (whatever that means), for the unseen ballast which gives a rounded density of 'real life', a presence far exceeding that of common humanity, to the *dramatis personae* of the epic, of the drama, of the novel. The word 'character' does mean the actual marker on the page. And there is undoubtedly a sense in which an Odysseus, a Falstaff, an Anna Karenina are 'characters', which is to say no more and no less than assemblages of lexical-grammatical signs on a page. But it is, very exactly, the quantum leap between the character as letter and the character as presence, and as a presence often far richer, more exigent of exploring assent, far more lasting than our own, which makes the point. Save in a formalistic sense, no sum of 'characters' creates a 'character'. The exponential modulation of the semiotic into the organic takes place in the "collision" […] between the mechanics of form and the 'otherness' in meaning.[14]

The step from a formalist to a personalist conception is here avowed. Interestingly, Steiner does not talk of the dichotomy character-person, but rather points to the enigmatic process that relates them and for which he uses the term 'presence'. The question is thus at the heart of the relation between linguistics and poetics, literature and culture, and more generally, between invention and creation. The fact that literature is no mere linguistic fiction nor a combinatorial contrivance of signs and texts that refer to each other, but also a process that penetrates reality thus causing events of meaning through which presences are manifested, needs to be demonstrated.

PRESENCE AS PERSONAL PHENOMENALITY

Steiner will do it through the notion of persona, which actually only appears as such towards the end and climax of his work, in *Grammars of Creation*: although he does not succeed in demonstrating it positively, he insists on the impossibility to deny the literary persona —and literature as a whole— its creational status. His argument proceeds on affirmative intuition, a logic of negation and a rhetoric of interrogation. To see, feel or understand real presences within or beyond language is an intuitive fact as difficult to prove as to deny. Yet a meditation on the concept of presence through the notion of persona seems to point to an intrinsic relationship between the «arts of language» and the field of creation:

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[14] George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, pp. 211-212.

In the arts of language, the concept of "creation" attaches most directly to that of character or *persona*. It is exemplified, principally, by the making present in fiction, be it that of poetry, of drama, or of the novel, of men and women, of children, and indeed, of animals. This presentment persuades us of their vital substance, of their existential weight, even where the genre is that of fantasy or the surreal. There is a palpable weight, an organic roundedness to the *personae* among Dante's dead or in Milton's celestial orders. The cognitive riddles, the unknown dynamics of narrative method which generate the life-force of the fictive character press on us with their evidence, but deny us any finality of explanation.[15]

The mere action of presenting a character not only informs us about his or her identity but also seems to convince us of his or her personal phenomenality. When the character appears as a whole that exceeds the sum of its composing parts and not only as the result of a construction process, when it takes on a personal and autonomous life in relation to its maker, we can dare to use the word *incarnation*, as Steiner does, using the plural and with a possessive article that still binds the creatures to their creator.

Being that question an epistemological knot, he proceeds by claiming that it is only through the use of theological metaphors that we can apprehend it. Indeed, back in *Real Presences*, inspired by such episodes as the Annunciation and the Visitation, he develops a long analogical parable through which the advent of literary meaning is envisaged as the unexpected visit from an unknown guest.[16] Within the context of literary studies he thus clearly, yet implicitly, avows for a personalist conception of the literary character as opposed to a structuralist or formalist one.[17]

For him the character is a person in that it acquires a real presence; it is a presence in that it is a person; it is a person in that it is a character. His conception of the character as an event of meaning which results in the symbolical manifestation of a person is particularly valuable in that it avoids the binary opposition character-person in which literary theory has often got stuck. Indeed, the notion of presence does not deny the literary character neither its linguistic status nor its personal one, but implies a phenomenology of a particular kind that

[15] George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, Yale and London: Yale University Press, pp. 159-160.
[16] The analogical parable is developed from chapter 1 to 4 of the third part (entitled "Presences") of *Real Presences*.
[17] In that we can associate his work with that of Michel Zéraffa, Vincent Jouve, John Frow, Uri Margolin and Jannis Fotidis, as far as literary studies are concerned, as well as those of the philosophers Christian Dours and Dominique Lestel. In their works, all of them eventually support the claim of the interdependence of character and person in both fiction and life.

goes beyond the formalist-psychologist opposition. Implicitly, he invites us to conceive of the character in a dynamic phenomenological approach, almost as a "saturated phenomenon"[18]: «Entering into us, the painting, the sonata, the poem brings us into reach of our own nativity of consciousness. It does so at a depth inaccessible in any other way. Literature and the arts are the perceptible witness to that freedom of coming into being of which history can give us no account.»[19] In history, we are characters in a functional, formal or structural sense. Through fiction we become persons, our own person. Once supposed that they are or can become presences, characters are necessarily present to someone, which in this case happens to be the reader or receiver. Steiner's reflection often seems to be searching for a previous presence on which to found all discourse and meaning. Yet what his use of the real presence ultimately entails is its being, ultimately, a revelation.[20] Presences reveal themselves through the unfolding of language, and through the particular interaction between text and context. This is why, as H. R. Jauss justly notes[21], Steiner's best point is his theory of reception expressed through the parable of a visiting guest. Through the unexpected yet desired, feared but welcomed apprehension of a guest, we actually become present to ourselves. What is more: the guest or the literary character actually constitutes an opportunity to receive ourselves. The real presence that is achieved is ours. Without solipsism, since it is through the visit of the other that my presence to myself happens. As Jean Greisch[22] already suggested, it is the phenomenology of encounter implicitly present in Steiner's discourse that should still interrogate us through its humanistic reach.

REAL PRESENCE, FICTION AND INTEGRAL HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

How does Steiner and especially his adding of a third term, that of "presence" contribute to integral human development (IHD)? Can ficticious persons such as literary characters play

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[18] The saturated phenomenon is one in which its intuition continually exceeds over its signification. The event as saturated phenomenon is one that is not staged but stages us; by giving itself it gives us the occasion to receive ourselves through its reception. See Jean-Luc Marion, *De surcroît*, Paris: PUF, 2001.
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[19] *Real Presences*, op. cit., p. 182.
[20] By linking the notion of presence to those of person and revelation, Steiner is close to the beautifully concise article of Roger Mehl on the notion of presence. See Roger Mehl, "Structure philosophique de la notion de présence", *Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie religieuses*, 1958, 38-2, pp. 171-176.
[21] Hans Robert Jauss, "Über religiose und ästhethische Erfahrung. Zur Debatte um Hans Beltings 'Bild und Kunst' und George Steiners 'Von realer Gegenwart' ", *Merkur* 9/10, pp. 935-946.
[22] Jean Greisch, "Lire, interpréter, créer. Les *Réelles Présences* de George Steiner", *Esprit*, 1992 (octobre), 185, pp. 55-70.

any relevant role in it? Does fiction enhance humanity? Is it and has it always been true human enhancement?

Through our phenomenological interpretation of the concept of real presence in George Steiner, we can answer that fiction potentially makes us really present and that it constitutes therefore not only a mode of evasion but also a means of incarnation. This is possible only on the grounds of a symbolical conception of reality: if reality is acknowledged to belong to a symbolical order, then we in turn need to be signified symbolically in order to participate in the symbolical texture of reality; to be present in reality.

Back to Steiner: is it his implicit interrogation on the humanizing status of literature and the arts which "pushes" him to adopt the terminology of presence? No doubt his is an integralistic vision: both as far as his supposedly specific field is concerned, as well as in terms of the astonishing wide range of his extradisciplinary interests. He surely was a practitian of transdisciplinarity *avant la lettre*. Not to mention that his perspective is never restrictedly technical.

All languages and disciplines tell us something about man and each of them does it in a different way thus disclosing differing aspects. Literature is committed to this task in an especially intense way, if we accept that all literary techniques are not an end to themselves but tend to express a conception of man and of the human person.[23] To which we could add, inspired by Steiner's analogy and parable, that literature potentially can make our person happen. It stands as an invitation to encounter oneself through and with the other and thus to become one's real person, to be present to oneself and thus belongs properly to integral human development.

We have pointed to the relevance of a transversal conception of the notion or idea of person in Steiner's reflections on literary meaning. I use the prepositions *behind*, *beneath*, *through* and *beyond* on purpose to point to a specific concept of transcendence, i.e. one that is personified and therefore not set apart from immanence, but crosses and passes through it. In this specific sense, transcendence is not separated from immanence. Rather, it is immanence visited. Transcendence passes through immanence. It is to such a dynamic and process that Steiner, through his thoroughly personalist conception of presence, points to. Although he himself is caught within a binary form of thinking and therefore feels compelled to employ the language of presence in an acrobatic gambling way, he nonetheless is deeply pervaded by a personalist drive which leads him beyond schemes. Thus, despite its ambiguity, his works

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[23] This point is particularly well demonstrated by Michel Zéraffa in *Personne et personage*, Paris: Klincksieck, 1969.

suggest new ways of thinking the interaction between literature, culture and religion. They point to an innovative way of practicing inter- and transdisciplinarity in a thoroughly humanistic perspective.