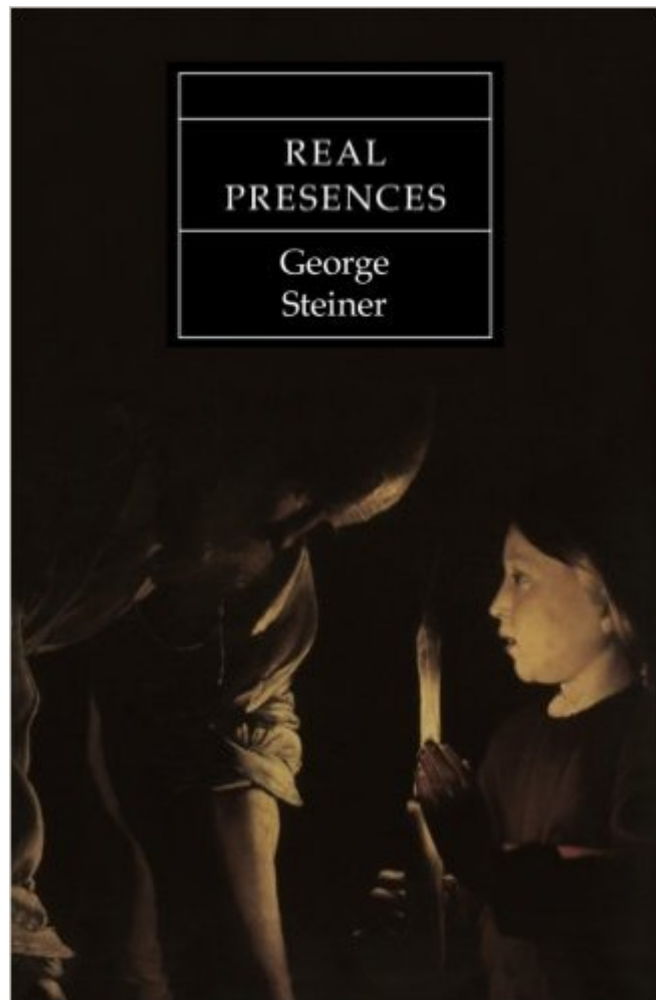


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# Real Presences



## 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*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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.

On rare occasions does one truly *\*encounter\** a book whose graceful eloquence both witnesses to the beauty of the human mind and to the beauty of human communication. To affirm both is to affirm the possibility - or, perhaps better, the probability - of a transcendent point of reference beyond our own humanity. *Real Presences* "proposes that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that nay coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence" (3). To read this book by Steiner really is something of an event. It tours metaphysics, particularly through in its Catholic incarnation (and the title of the book is very much along these very Catholic lines - although whether or not Steiner is Catholic I do not know), as well as art. As he affirms early on, asking what music is can also be understood as a way of asking what humanity is. The book begins with the essay "A Secondary City" (which certainly evokes St. Augustine), moves on to "The Broken Contract" (with its intimations of Enlightenment political philosophy), and ends with "Presences" (an affirmation of the wager for God's existence as the ground in which we walk). This is a polemic against nihilism, particularly in its guise of deconstruction, which has nothing to say about death and is incapable of affirming the possibility of determinative meaning. Thus "art

for art's sake" is pure narcissism and pure suicide - and it seems to me that the target of such "art for art's sake" are those theorists who write for the sake of writing, rather than for the sake of communicating. In calling poetry, sculpture, painting as witnesses for his case, Steiner deems art a "leap out of nothingness" (202) where the artist, as in Joyce, imitates God. Questions of art are fundamentally theological. However, Steiner is by no means willing to affirm that presence is given or seen in full (citing St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians). Borrowing imagery again from the Catholic tradition, he writes that we all live in journey of Saturday, even as we are on our way to Sunday, the lineaments of which "carry the name hope (there is no word less deconstructible)" (232). In the meantime, it is the arts - with their doxologies of the messianic - which give us to patience. Dense and highly rewarding, you will likely ponder these things for some time to come.

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