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A Review by Jesse G. Swan of *Lessons of the Masters*, by George Steiner

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George Steiner, *Lessons of the Masters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003.

Reviewed by Jesse G. Swan

Lessons of the Masters, George Steiner's published version of the Charles Eliot Norton lectures he gave in 2001-2002, is to be a lesson in the value of conceptualizing, fostering, and admiring highly idiosyncratic individuals engaged in teaching, be it teaching live, present persons or future, absent generations. The theme and style are familiar, as is the abiding sense of nostalgia and impending elegy: "Having taught for half a century, and in numerous countries and systems of higher education," Steiner announces in the first sentence of these melancholic reflections, "I have found myself increasingly uncertain as to the legitimacy, as to the underlying truths of this 'profession'" (1). "In the libertarian climate of our own day" (2), Steiner finds very little appreciation of "Masters," always dignified with the majuscule, and their role in forming "disciples," always rendered with the minuscule, except at the beginning of a sentence. There is some hope, but only of the most reserved, almost petulantly reserved kind:

Scientism; feminism; mass democracy and its media. Can, should "the lessons of the Masters" survive their tidal onrush? I believe that they will, even if in unforeseeable guise. I believe that they must. *Libido sciendi*, a lust for knowledge, an ache for understanding is incised in the best of men and women. (183)

With mandarin aplomb, Steiner hopes to flatter his auditors and then readers into the vain idea that they are the best of men and women, when they admire and submit to their Master.

The volume proceeds from secular to religious mastership and in chronological and geographical order of mastership, ending, naturally, with "us." This "us" is largely an amalgamation of certain modern Teutonic, Gallic, Judeo-Christian, and Anglophonic traditions culled from a certain appropriation of ancient Hebraic, Greco, and Latinate traditions and promulgated in the U.S. when Steiner was a nascent Master, when trust of Masters and their ways was felt to be high. "We" have fallen off, though: "In the United States, over these past decades, two movements or pathologies have eroded trust between Master and disciple, between the teachers and the taught" (140). The first movement is the removal of Eros from the "laying of hands on the quick of another human being, on its unfolding, implicit in teaching" (140-41). The removal has been effected, Steiner explains, through the introduction of "'sexual harassment' in the American manner," since such an introduction "has contributed menace and trivialization, cynicism and the arts of blackmail" to the millennia-old

endeavor of mastering disciples (141). We're to think of as many examples of erotically mastered disciples as we can here, from Alcibiades to the legions mastered by Knute Rockne, who, Steiner declares, "stands supreme" (138). "That charges of harassment *have* been justified is certain" Steiner admits, with some italicized emphasis, but he does so in order to suggest that if we are to acknowledge such a fact, we must accept his twin, paratactically expressed fact, "that the crazed competition for academic chances has led to abuse is undeniable," as of at least comparable significance, if not, given his theme and rhetorical rhythm, perhaps more (142).

The "ruinous" condition realized in recent decades by the serious attention given to accusations of solicitation, molestation, and rape has caused the second movement pulling us down, according to Steiner. This second pathology, the "[a]bstention from irony, from alertness to ridicule which should mark adult sensibility" (142), almost finishes the job of destroying Masters. The causal links between his generalized and so impossible to instantiate abstention from irony and the decline of exceptional teaching, like the causal link between the serious attention paid to serious accusations and the consequent abstention from irony, are to be "self-evident" (143). Accordingly, I will quote the entire paragraph Steiner offers to elaborate his claim that the abstention from irony with disciples, to say nothing of sexual relations, erodes trust between teachers and the taught. In abstaining from irony, and despite some "valid grounds" for doing so,

What has too often ensued, however, is a travesty of responsible argument and scholarship. Artificially hyped and factitious oralities, folk texts, sub- and anti-literacies have been exalted. Pseudo-curricula have been institutionalized at the price of indispensable disciplines, creating not liberation but new ghettos for the African American or the Chicano. History has been rewritten to the point of parody. The truth is that for better or worse (I have spent a working lifetime urging the question of the correlations between the humanities and the inhuman), our heritage in the west is that of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. The alphabet of our recognitions is that developed by "dead white males." Our literary, philosophical, aesthetic touchstones are those of a European and North American core, often vividly influenced from outside and now qualified and enriched by ethnic plurality. To regard Sophocles or Dante or Shakespeare as somehow tainted by imperialist, colonialist mentality is idiocy pure and simple. To discard western poetry or the novel from Cervantes to Proust as "male chauvinistic" is blindness. As is the renunciation of the creative force of grammars and developed vocabularies under pressure of linguistic vandalism and diminution. That Bach and Beethoven actualize reaches of human endeavour surpassing rap or heavy metal, that Keats challenges insights of which Bob Dylan's lyrics are innocent, is or ought to be self-evident whatever the political-social connotations - and these do exist - of such conviction. (142-43)

The metonymies or patterns of associations or, as Steiner terms them, the "alphabet of our recognitions" of this paragraph are revealing, but hardly of the "self-evident" "truth" Steiner experiences in his highly idiosyncratic, however conventionally, phantasmagoria. (I trust that all understand that I do not abstain from irony or the creative force of grammar in describing Steiner's phantasmagoria.) In this bold, candid, willfully ignorant and bigoted reverie, we the disciples are to supply the instances of the travesties, pseudo-curricula, rewritten histories; we the disciples are to submit to the master's sense of "our," even as those he references, such as the ancient peoples of the heterogeneous capitals he names were hardly, in any singular sense, their own; we the disciples are

to be afraid, very afraid, of idiocy and blindness, paying no heed to the possibilities of idiocy such as William Blake's or of a blindness such as Oedipus's; and we the disciples are diligently to ignore and deny politico-social implications and effects only when it comes to imbibing the master's self-evident, metonymical truth. For a Master, this seems like great work, if you can get it, which you can't anymore, Steiner laments, because of, remember, the serious attention paid to women making complaints about masters laying their hands on their quick, which has caused the removal of Eros from teaching, which has caused the abstention from irony, which has caused the phantasmagoria "the best of men and women," that is, the true, if few, disciples, share with the master. The simplicity of truth and the self-evident could never be plainer for men, and women, such as Steiner.

Steiner closes his volume by referring to an exchange between two of his most revered Masters, Nietzsche and Mahler, which is supposed to leave us disciples in the best posture he can imagine for us. It is telling that Steiner would never, could never conclude any reverie with an exchange between very different sorts of masters, such as Milton and Charles I. In response to Charles I's religio-political, nostalgic, auto-elegiac plaint in *Eikon Basilike* that,

God knows I longed for nothing more than that myself and my subjects might quietly enjoy the fruits of my many condescendings, (ed. Philip Knachel, p. 22)

Milton responds in *Eikonoklastes*,

. . . that those gracious Acts wherof so frequently he makes mention, may be english'd more properly Acts of fear and dissimulation against his mind and conscience. (*Complete Prose Works*, vol. III, ed. Merritt Hughes, pp. 401-02)

Steiner's Masters all come in the form of a Charles I; masters in the U.S., Steiner carps, are too, too, well, Miltonic. Masters in the U.S. are admired and even revered, but not the way Steiner, or Charles I, conceptualize admiration and reverence. The icon propagated by *Lessons of the Masters* is one that will appeal to those who have a developed erotics of domination and subservience. For those with more egalitarian pleasures, the icon of the *Lessons of the Masters* will be one that will need breaking, yet once more.

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