

Peter Goldsworthy's *Maestro*: Notes by Stefaan Steyn

While many critics may feel that Goldsworthy's "*Maestro*" is a relatively superficial novel which plays out teenage clichés about growing up while only drawing in a very limited way on the more complex and darker domains of musical genius and genocide, this viewpoint is in itself somewhat superficial.

It is true that the novel explores the teenage protagonist Paul's sexual awakening and his struggles for social acceptance alongside the terrible history that explains the inner demons of his antagonist - the enigmatic piano teacher Herr Keller. It may seem to many that Goldsworthy treats his more dramatic, though less contemporary material superficially, while expanding on the more superficial, but more accessible aspects of his story. Many have suggested that "*Maestro*" is thus, in effect, only a work of teenage fiction, which cannot be considered as serious literature.

However, this viewpoint ignores the fine irony of the narrative structure of the text - with the older narrator - the adult Paul - complicit in an initially unlikable and somewhat misleading self-portrayal. The first pages explicitly highlight the degree to which any narration - any attempt to tell the truth - is a form of falsification, in stating how the narrator's representation of Keller is necessarily false and misleading.

It is not only the portrayal of Keller that is misleading, but also Paul's portrayal of himself. Significantly too, this misleading self-portrayal is misleadingly negative, rather than positive, unlike one might expect - a critical element of the text's *modus operandi*. The text finally reads like a confession, rather than an excuse.

This introduction to the text, along with the presentation of the distinct tensions between different characters' understanding of the world - Paul's parents - and more centrally the conflict between Keller and Paul, suggests we are dealing with more than a clichéd unpacking of the traditional relationship between master and pupil.

The novel's conclusion integrates similar complexities : the middle-aged Paul nostalgically acknowledges, excuses and celebrates the follies of youth. If anything, the middle-aged Paul's narration of his youthful passions is haunted by the shadow of mortality - the macabre figure of Herr Keller looming over Paul's youth foreshadows Paul's own later potential disintegration. Equally, the living spectre of Paul haunts Keller who consumes and is consumed by history.

Tellingly, Keller is more than musician - elevated to be a genius of suffering and tragedy - a master of self-knowledge, rather than primarily the musical genius Paul wishes to emulate. Keller consistently destroys this image of musical greatness - his present life, much like his past life is one of self-destruction.

Significantly, Paul comes to understand that this self-mastery through self-knowledge - the defeat of the ego - stands more central than musical mastery. Ironically, Paul achieves self-mastery through self-knowledge, exactly because he comes to understand

that he has failed - not because of a lack of technical competence or lack of self-control, but because he has failed to find the higher passions present within music.

The exalted 'tone' of the novel's end suggests that Paul comes to understand that this higher passion is to be found within the ordinary passions of his own life - hence his growth in self-acceptance and his nostalgia for his youth. In effect Paul's life passed him by because he was looking elsewhere for its meaning. This retelling, this dramatic re-enactment of his youth represented in the narration is a reliving of it, a living of it properly for the first time in the telling of it.

The status of the adult narrator Paul as a primary character in the novel, rather than only a narrative device becomes very significant for this very reason. On the adult Paul depends the essentially dramatic nature of the text. The adult Paul historically reenacts events in order to uncover, discover and elevate his true self by dispelling the false self - the initial construct that the young Paul has of himself - his false self-image.

Herr Keller is presented as a mirror in which both the younger and adult Pauls are gradually enabled to see themselves. The adult Paul must retract the enigma of the compromised genius he has projected upon Keller to acknowledge this enigma as an aspect of himself.

However, this leads to a further dramatic irony for readers - a second narrative double entendre'. The second adult Paul - Paul as narrator - may be as much of a false representation as the initial self-representation - the younger Paul of the first part of the text. The initial false image Paul had of himself has been presented for the purposes of self-authentication and self-discovery by the narrator as the adult Paul.

One might also acknowledge that the narrator - the adult Paul - is more character than actual narrator - a self-made construct generated to selectively reveal and hide particular aspects of himself. The primary narrator (as a character) is thus a ghost throughout the initial part of the text - continually gainsaying the primary first person voice.

The text thus presents a second level of the game of identity at this less obvious level. Exactly why has the adult Paul constructed the narration of his younger, and present life exactly in the way he has? To what degree has the adult Paul come to realise his 'true identity' within the mirror of Keller's true identity? To what degree is the adult Paul still blind to himself, lying to himself, and thus to his accompanying audience?

Given the cautionary tale of Keller's questionable and misleading identity, one must then be willing to question the adult Paul's own capacity for self-knowledge when Paul as narrator "drops the mask" - and readers see that the shadows of his own inadequacies are more telling than the truth of Herr Keller's own tragedy. The particularly jarring ambivalence of the adult Paul's closing statements about nostalgia, about falsehood and narration echo the opening statements about the necessary false nature of the representation of Keller.

It may even be suggested that, as those opening statements leads readers into the awareness of the text's ironic nature - that we are being misled - in being echoed here at the end - also suggest that we are being misled at this point also. This reiteration of the degree to which personality, situation and intention shape consciousness and therefore also narration only serves to drive home a central theme of the text - as we are we see things, and we tell things as we see them, and, if the way we see things depends on what we tell ourselves, then we must acknowledge that we ourselves are a fictitious representation of ourselves - nothing but fiction.

It could be claimed therefore that Goldsworthy's apparently superficial novel shares the company of much serious literature in echoing this philosophical message - the necessary fact that what we believe to be fact is in effect nothing but fiction, a form of existentialist 'bad faith'. In effect, the novel's beguiling 'superficiality' - what is labelled as a weakness - is essential to this most profound aspect of its nature - its capacity to have its readers reflect critically on the relatively potentially fictitious nature of their own lives, which may, or may not be equally superficial - but, critically - only apparently so.

It could be claimed that this realisation is what stands central to Paul's journey - he must come to see himself in the Keller who claims to see through the reality of things to dismiss them as meaningless absurdities. It is exactly Keller's duality - his embrace of the horrible along with the great - which initially fascinates and disturbs Paul. He is shaken by this man who sees through him.

There is this strange duality between Keller and Paul - Paul cannot see because he wishes to hold onto false truths, and Keller cannot see because he believes those true things he sees to be false. Both of them must come to a reckoning. While Paul is attracted by, identifies with and also imitates Keller's genius he is equally fascinated by and implicated in Keller's self-destructiveness. While Paul eschews Keller's discipline - which he initially falsely attributes to a fascist culture, rather than to the characteristics of genius and the repression of unmanageable pain - he self-destructively shares in Keller's initial pursuit of success, social acceptance and happiness.

It could be said that Paul's banal and youthful peacetime pursuit of pleasure, fame and acceptance exactly mirror - even parody - the tragic circumstances of Keller's wartime rise and fall - dramatically heightened by the terrible history of wartime Vienna. Paul's seemingly unimportant sexual pursuits and conquests, his teenage experience of exclusion, compromise and minor popular musical success all mimic Keller's prior, though more grave situation.

What is important to the adolescent Paul at the time is presented in relief by the adult Paul's knowledge of Keller's true story - his own experiences pale into insignificance in comparison with Keller's story. He comes to realise to what degree he lives a life of shadow - much like Keller who has come to live a life of shadow. The question also arises whether Paul's lapse into nostalgia and an acceptance of his mediocrity is not a similar attempt to escape the harsh light of truth once exposed to its discomforts.

Why then, may one ask, does the narrator initially indulge his adolescent self and let things be seen as if through the naïve Paul's eyes? Is it, as is stated later - due to the forgiving nature of nostalgia. or is there something else at work? The degree to which the adult Paul presents his adolescent self ambiguously in unattractive terms suggests that, rather than nostalgia, one has to do here with the generation of a form of dramatic irony - the image of the selfish, narrow-minded and egotistic adolescent Paul that readers are led to dislike, rather than primarily celebrate, suggests readers are being asked to look beyond, to question the primary narration, to seek the truth beyond the self-evident. We are given an image that is deliberately open to question and critique.

The comfortable 'teenage narrative' of growing up, of self-discovery, of growing socialisation and sexualisation is disrupted from within by a less evident truth intruding into the frame. It could be said that this is at the heart of Goldsworthy's intent - the parody, rather than the affirmation of the cliché's of teenage fiction. Goldsworthy, it could be said, embraces a more significant aspect of the bildungsroman - the constellation of identity through self-representation, and even further, the later reconstellation of identity through conscious self-examination.

Any reading of "Maestro" which does not recognise this dual nature of the initial first person narrative and the attendant contingent nature of the characters fails to recognise the importance of the Keller and adult Paul subtext within the whole - presumably because the figure of Keller and his wartime story is seen as a superficial and coincidental 'tag' to the main drama of Paul's more ordinary exploits - rather than a deliberate authorial subversion of the main narrative. Such a naïve acceptance of the obviously naïve narrator's rendition of events seems, however, to be unjustified.

In effect, therefore, the apparent weakness of Goldsworthy's novel can be restated as its central thrust: its focus on the teenage adventures of an unremarkable person in an Australian backwater, and its apparently superficial treatment of the intersection between profoundly personal tragedy and historical calamity within the biographical details of a genius epitomises a certain viewpoint of Australian society. The tide of great events and its associated heightened personal dramas only break on Australian shores as a minor ripple - while banal and superficial local melodrama take central stage. Of course, such a view dismisses the profoundly tragic and dramatic bedrock of Australian society, and minimises the subjective significance of superficially apparently insignificant events.

Maybe, then, this is something of Goldsworthy's central theme - the significance of events and their meaning are highly subjective and also contingent on subsequent reevaluation. The true import of events tend to escape us, as we are distracted by the banal concerns of our own small lives. Also, the way we may view our lives may preclude us from understanding their true and profound significance - our lives may in effect also not be banal or small. Therefore, any reading of Goldsworthy's text which overlooks his ironic intent in emphasising the banal (though to Paul himself all-consuming) and every day at the expense of the profound is itself banal.

It is significant that the narrative concerns itself with tracking Paul's growing insight into himself equally with recording events. Equally, something of the intention of the narrative is seen in the dramatic irony which the older Paul as narrator visits on the younger Paul as central character - Paul 'gives away' his own story in attempting to tell Keller's, discovering himself rather than the enigmatic Keller in his searching.

Readers thus look upon the younger Paul with the same critical disposition as the older Paul - with our attention equally drawn to those factors which shape his vision as his vision itself. The focus of the text is as much the critical insights of experience - the contingent vision of the present as it is a record of exuberant naïvety. As much as the figure of Keller embodies something of the middle-aged Paul, the youthful Paul embodies something of Keller himself which has been lost, if not only Keller's lost son.

The young Paul initially creates a false self - an inauthentic, egoistic false self - in his pursuit of musical success. Keller (along with the readers) sees through this false self and mocks Paul's lack of musical integration - his music lacks the authenticity that comes from experience and self-knowledge. It is Paul's pursuit of the truth of Keller's identity that leads to his destruction of this false self. The adult Paul then recreates himself through destroying this prior self-image - via the process of self-examination expressed within the primary narration of the text. It appears that creation and destruction implicitly go hand in hand.

To conclude: the image of Keller hiding under his grand piano in the cyclone that destroys Darwin is one of supreme aesthetic power - we will hide ourselves in our art when life destroys all else around us, and that which we hide within our art will be destroyed in the process of artistic creation. This echoes too the traditional icon of the self-destructive genius offering themselves up for the sake of their art.

The final question that must be asked is what the adult Paul, the narrator symbolises, and, if this adult Paul has revealed certain dimensions of truth and self-knowledge, what aspects of truth have been covered up by the same token, and what further unknown aspects of the narrator, and more importantly, what the narrator may represent, are hidden within the text.

While it has been traditional to hunt for authorial intention, even authorial self-reference within a text, it has been equally traditional to dismiss such attempts. Certainly, while an author may in some way be represented in their text, and a text may in some way be representative of an author, it is equally true that it has come to be understood that textual representation is indefinite in its nature, incapable of being reduced to a single viewpoint or disposition, and that there are multiple representative viewpoints in relation to any text. It is as facile to say that "Maestro" is a unilateral text with a single message, as it is to suggest that it is Goldsworthy's own story - this is patently superficial.

If anything, the novel "Maestro", reminds readers of the degree to which the apparently simple truths of any matter may dissolve into ambivalence and uncertainty. Equally too,

the text can be seen to suggest that the single-minded pursuit of certainty is likely to give rise to delusion and self-deception.

Finally too, any proclamation of a simple single point of view on any complex matter - such as one's own identity or the meaning of another's life is likely to be duplicitous, if not downright deceptive.