Paul’s appreciation of maestro

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Peter Goldsworthy’s Maestro is essentially a Bildungsroman, in that it follows Paul on his journey from child to adult, and from childishness to maturity. As with all stories of growth and development, Maestro’s focus is often upon Paul’s weaknesses, faults and mistakes – his arrogance, naivety, obstinacy, smugness, indecisiveness and rashness. These common maladies of youth blind Paul to Keller’s true value. As is befitting a novel of personal development, Paul’s moment of realisation does not come suddenly, the moment Keller dies. Rather, his appreciation for Keller grows gradually, as each of his life experiences widen his naive and self-centered eyes. Keller’s death is simply the completion of Paul’s journey of self-discovery and growth of character which allows him to recognise his mistakes and to finally value Keller for the tremendous influence he exerted upon his life. In the regretful and poignant final chapter of Maestro, Goldsworthy seems to suggest that life, unlike the piano, must be learnt through personal experience, rather than taught. It is only from the hindsight of maturity, after experiencing some of the same disappointments and awakenings of his mentor, that Paul is able to esteem Keller as “ a Great Man”, and to realise too late the folly of his youth. The reason Paul can laud Keller as “ Great” is because of the exemplary traits, such as the wisdom and self-sacrifice born of a lifetime of experience, that Keller exhibits – the same traits that Paul failed to appreciate and model. Paul begins his journey towards maturity as a naive and spoilt young boy – essentially an infant, in that he is concerned only for himself and his own needs. From the moment of their introduction, Paul is completely unappreciative of Keller. His opinion of his new tutor is dictated by his own selfishness and spoilt attitude. Of Keller’s well-tailored appearance, Paul presumes: “ Had he spruced up especially to meet me? I

was child enough – self-centered enough – to think it likely.” Like a child, Paul immediately judges Keller by his outward appearance, labeling him a “ boozer” and, without having heard him play, remarks: “ A pianist’s hands? Impossible!” Paul’s ego makes him quick to judge Keller’s methods as “ simple and patronising”. He even describes him as “ a sadist” to his father in a fit of childish exasperation. Paul’s spoilt and know-all attitude results in him not believing “ a word Keller had said” after their first lesson. He continues this immature behaviour, thinking tactlessly of Keller as a “ Nazi” and “ Adolf Keller”. In his youthful inexperience, Paul exaggerates his own potential and is unwilling to appreciate the vastly greater skill and experience of his mentor. Keller is quick to diagnose these faults, saying: “ You are spoilt” and “ too given to self satisfaction”. In his wisdom, Keller chooses not only to teach Paul to play piano, but also attempts to instill character in his new pupil, saying: “ First you must learn to listen”. However, the value of these life lessons, and of the man teaching them, is lost on the young Paul. In these early stages of Paul’s life are evident the common faults of youth – its tendencies towards pride, selfishness and poor judgment that all too often end in regret once maturity is reached, as is the case in Paul’s life. As Paul grows older, he begins to develop a measure of appreciation for his stern yet longsuffering tutor. By chance, Paul learns more about this enigmatic man, and this knowledge causes him to begin to understand Keller a little more. Keller’s tardiness for a lesson results in Paul’s discovery of photos of his wife and child. Keller’s undressing in Adelaide reveals his “ six faded blue digits” – relics of his wartime horrors. Motivated by youthful curiosity, Paul uncovers the tragic fate of Keller’s wife in an Adelaide library. He overhears Keller playing Liszt in a way that “ seemed nearer to lovemaking than to music”,

but with “ Contempt and self-hatred.” He observes this elderly maestro “ Weeping in his white tropical suit” at the music of Wagner, reduced to tears by its obviously terrible connotations. As a result of these experiences, Paul gradually begins to recognise Keller’s immense talent, and also the weight of the past that haunts him. These discoveries, as well as the vast knowledge of piano that Keller imparts, soften Paul’s perception of this hard man. Through this process of enlightenment, Goldsworthy explores a young person’s natural progression from experience to knowledge, and from knowledge to understanding – a process the adult Paul describes as “ like a slowly developing polaroid print, gaining colour and texture and detail even as I watch.” However, despite Paul’s increasing experience and knowledge, his understanding and appreciation of Keller remains superseded by adolescent arrogance and pride up until Keller’s death. As Paul’s high school years come to a close, he is still yet to forsake his “ youthful arrogance.” Before Paul leaves for university, Keller attempts to share his troubled past with his favourite pupil – a privilege that Paul “ through selfishness and sensual addiction, failed to accept.” At this final parting of ways, Keller attempts to tell Paul the truth about his doubtful future as a concert pianist, but Paul’s pride immediately interprets this honesty as an insult: “ I couldn’t believe my ears: our last hour together and he wanted to insult me.” During university, it becomes evident that Paul still has a lot to learn. He is “ smug, insufferable”, and considers himself “ far better at playing the piano than anyone else.” Rather than being thankful for Keller, Paul foolishly decides: “ I knew enough… I’d learnt all the lessons that were in his power to teach me… his advice seemed irrelevant, long behind me.” As a result of this inflated self-image, Paul sees himself as “ the only pianist I had time to listen to.” In

this period of “ self-preoccupations”, Goldsworthy’s concern is the pride that often accompanies new-found knowledge and experience – a pride frequently followed by regret, as it is in Paul’s case. Gradually, the harsh reality of life begins to wear down Paul’s naive pride. His youthfulness gives way to the dawning realisations of adulthood. In Europe, Paul’s “ enthusiasm slowly faded”. In Henisch’s living room, Paul is “ hurt, enormously” by the words: “ you did not learn from Eduard Keller.” Pain and failure open Paul’s eyes through “ times of depression and frustration.” Once Keller dies, Paul begins to see the full picture – his “ polaroid print” finally develops. This sad yet enlightening experience places Paul in a position to appreciate Keller, and to perceive his own faults and failures. Paul is no longer smug, describing himself as: “ Paul Crabbe, greying, dissatisfied.” Paul is no longer proud, describing his life as “ a foolish, innocent world, a world of delusion… and ridiculous dreams.” Most importantly, Paul is no longer self-centered, for once appreciating Keller for the truly “ Great Man” that he was. In death, Keller’s life lessons finally make sense to Paul. After being blinded so long by naivety and arrogance, Paul comes to appreciate Keller’s sense of guilt; his exile; his self-sacrifice; his willingness to teach an obstinate and arrogant pupil; his discernment; his wisdom and sagacity; his grim nobility of character; and, most of all, his maturity. Like Paul, Keller owed his maturity more to his mistakes and failures than his successes. In his own eyes, Keller had committed the most heinous crime by failing to protect his family from the gas of Auschwitz. But unlike the self-centered Paul, Keller’s greatness lay in his chosen selflessness. Rather than giving up, Keller sought to atone for his mistakes. Rather than taking his own life or returning to glory in Europe, Keller chooses a noble anonymity as penance. He symbolically severs his

little finger – the finger introduced to piano playing by his beloved Liszt – thus renouncing his love for Liszt’s romantic music. Keller seeks atonement the only way he knows how – by relinquishing the accolades of the piano world, and passing on his wisdom to an unappreciative pupil. And in his undistinguished death, Keller performs his last great deed by helping Paul become more mature and appreciative. The journey from immaturity to maturity is one of the most poignant themes of Maestro. Goldsworthy depicts Paul as being spurred onwards on this journey by each of his life experiences. It is through the sharp learning curve of growing up, and its accompanying lessons of pain, failure and grief, that Paul is finally able to leave behind his innocence and his folly. Goldsworthy depicts Paul’s loss of Keller as his most important experience – one that dispels his lack of appreciation for others, especially Keller, and that makes him fully aware of his own immaturities. Thus, one of Maestro’s most interesting implications is that some lessons must be learnt the hard way through personal experience – no matter how much knowledge one acquires, no matter how much one is taught, and no matter how infallible one may feel. To recognise Keller as a great man was the end result of Paul’s journey towards maturity, and was an appreciation reliant upon the necessity of his own personal experience.