

BOOK REVIEWS

DRAFT

Małgorzata Hołda. *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021.

What is Beauty? Is Beauty truth and truth Beauty, as John Keats claimed? How does Beauty relate to the way we live our lives? These complex and recurring questions seem especially challenging today when the notion of Beauty becomes ever harder to grasp or define. Małgorzata Hołda's *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* is an original and exciting study, which explores Beauty not as an aesthetic concept but as a mode of being of human beings. Bringing into conversation Virginia Woolf and Hans Georg-Gadamer, Hołda invites us to delve into the hermeneutics of the beautiful in their philosophy and literature. Crucially, Hołda discloses that reflection on Beauty invites us to pose questions that go beyond disciplinary boundaries of philosophy and literature. While a similar interdisciplinary approach leads the recent study *Hermeneutic Ontology in Gadamer and Woolf* (Noland 2019), Hołda's volume is unique in reconceptualizing our beliefs about the very nature of such interdisciplinary scholarship. We are invited to understand that engaging with Woolf and Gadamer on Beauty calls for a hermeneutic reading – a reading which does not consist in a juxtaposition of philosophical ideas with its literary application, but in a philosophical reading of literature and a literary reading of philosophy. Instead of treating Gadamer's ideas as a framework to read Woolf, Hołda enters a creative dialogue with both authors, finding fascinating points of convergence and divergence between them, thus giving her readers a chance to experience

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their genius in a completely different and transformative way. As a hermeneutic phenomenon which calls for thinking, Beauty in the present volume is explored through three main parts: *Beauty as a Mode of Being*, *The Restorative Capacity of Beauty*, and *The Beauty of Poetry as a Gateway to Being*. In this tripartite investigation, Holda creatively combines a reflection on the Gadamerian understanding of Beauty and Being as originated in his *Truth and Method* with a thorough interpretation of Woolf's most notable works: *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *The Waves*. While focusing on the manifestations of Beauty in poetry and language, Holda shows that, for both Gadamer and Woolf, Beauty is found in a vast array of experiences: in works of art, in ritual and play (Gadamer), in rites of repetition and passage in nature and human experience, including death (Woolf). Simultaneously interpreting Gadamer's hermeneutic aesthetics and Woolf's fictional imaginings, Holda not only skillfully brings to the forefront the affinities in the authors' understanding of the beautiful, but also inspires us to see their philosophy and literature as united in meditation on the fundamental relation between Beauty and Being.

By emphasizing this relation, Holda makes us grasp that encounters with Beauty are not static and unidirectional – whereby a recipient admires an awe-inspiring and pleasure-inducing work – but actively engage the whole of our being. Gadamer understands the aesthetic encounter as an event (*Ereignis*), as something that only truly occurs when it is seen, experienced, and made our own by appropriating it, giving voice to its sense. This essentially dialogical understanding of the experience of Beauty entails that manifestations of Beauty are not fixed and atemporal, complete in themselves – they are, rather, actualized in an event of the encounter with the spectator, listener, or reader. Beauty speaks to us, confronts us, and requires us to respond to it. We are not passive recipients of Beauty, but active participants of the dialogue with it. It is only in the encounter that Beauty happens. The crucial importance of the response of the spectator or the recipient of Beauty unveils our radical responsibility in both the aesthetic encounter and our lives. In Woolf's narratives, Holda finds a deep conviction that Beauty's dialogical character prompts attitudes of openness and attention, as well as a fuller understanding of intersubjectivity and subjectivity.

Woolf and Gadamer share an anti-Kantian approach to Beauty, that is: instead of relating Beauty to pleasure, they see it above all as “the enlargement of our being.” Through Holda's reflection on the similarities between Woolf's understanding of Beauty as a “moment of being” and Gadamer's philosophy of abandoning oneself in front of an artwork, which generates

a seminal change in the spectator, we are led to appreciate the encounter with Beauty as an experience of authentic Being in its temporal, transcendental, and transformative dimensions. Both Woolf and Gadamer are inspired by the notion of *Augenblick*, “moment of vision,” which Heidegger in *Being and Time* describes as “That Present which is held in authentic temporality and which thus is authentic itself” (Heidegger 1967, 387). And further:

This term must be understood in the active sense as an ecstasis. It means the resolute rapture with which Dasein is carried away to whatever possibilities and circumstances are encountered in the Situation as possible objects of concern, but a rapture held in resoluteness. The moment of vision is a phenomenon which in principle cannot be clarified in terms of the “now” [dem Jetzt]. The “now” is a temporal phenomenon which belongs to time as within-time-ness: the “now” in which something arises, passes away, or is present-at-hand. ‘In the moment of vision’ nothing can occur; but as an authentic Present or waiting-towards, the moment of vision permits us to encounter for the first time what can be ‘in a time’ as ready-to-hand or present-at hand. (Heidegger 1967, 387–8)

Augenblick is thus a moment of insight that disrupts the inauthentic temporality of everydayness and confronts Dasein with the authentic Present – a Present in which, for Heidegger, nothing occurs, yet we see that which needs to be seen with unique clarity. Rooted in the Greek notion of *kairos*, a decisive moment or an appropriate possibility that is disclosed in *phronesis*, and re-conceptualized in the Christian tradition as a transformative time when the world is revealed anew in relation to God, *Augenblick* is a vital instant that can change the sense of life. This turning point has practical consequences in a situation and is profoundly transformative. It is understood as active ecstasis – which, from Greek *ekstasis*, means “to stand outside of or transcend oneself” (Britannica). Reading Gadamer and Woolf in light of the Heideggerian notion of *Augenblick* allows us to see that for both, the ecstatic forgetfulness which occurs as the result of an encounter with Beauty is crucial to the understanding of the aesthetic experience and its transformational potential. Through such an encounter, we are captivated by Beauty, taken outside of ourselves, in order to return to ourselves transformed. Following Holda,

to encounter art, to be absorbed in beauty, means to momentarily abandon one’s life. This one-of-a-kind abandonment is followed by a meaningful return,

but as Gadamer states, it is the coming-back to the whole of one's existence. Therefore, we can say that it is not a retrieval of the former, unchanged, unaffected existence, but a seminal recuperation of one's life in its entirety, which also means that it is no longer possible to stay the same as one was before. An encounter with an artwork is the very touching of the untouchable. In this sense, contemplating art can be viewed as a transformative event. (21)

Such an encounter transforms us but does not alienate us from everydayness – rather, it allows us to re-immense ourselves in facticity. Vitally, as Holda further explicates through her fascinating analysis of concealment and unconcealment, this transformation is not a sudden alteration of our being, but a revealing of it, and as such, it is consistent with Being itself. The experience of Beauty helps us to uncover something vital about ourselves, and this uncovering transforms us in its deepest sense, restoring us to ourselves.

This exciting reflection on the transformative potential of Beauty is substantiated by Holda's study of the relation between Beauty and Truth (*kalon* and *aletheia*). Exploring the Platonic origins of Woolf and Gadamer's ontological and aesthetic views, Holda unveils their shared belief in the inseparability of the two notions, which entails that Beauty has a crucial cognitive and contemplative character. In her analysis of Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* and Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, Holda invites us to consider aesthetic encounter as the locus of knowledge understood not in its rational, moral or conceptual sense, but in its meditative dimension. Crucial to grasping this assertion is Heidegger's distinction between meditative and calculative thinking (*besinnliches und berechnendes Denken*), which for Holda is the very basis of hermeneutic aesthetics. As we read in *Gelassenheit*, calculative thinking relies on calculable facts and counts on predictable, calculable results. Such thinking facilitates planning and making. However, if life is based on calculation, we lose sight of the meaning of things that are being calculated. Pure calculation inevitably leads to the "clear realism of animal life, the sharp and realistic view, the unsentimental outlook quick to take advantage of circumstances to attain an end" (Heidegger 1966, 12). Meditative thinking, in turn, does not calculate. It is the "thinking which contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is," and thus constitutes the only remedy to the fallacies of the calculative approach to life (Heidegger 1966, 46). Meditative thinking is understood as "coming-into-the-nearness-of-distance," and it crucially requires us to be "open to the mystery" of that which is. *On Beauty and Being* shows us that encounters with Beauty inspire us to think meditatively, and thus to reach for the truth about Being:

The uniqueness of an understanding which happens in an aesthetic encounter speaks to one's experience, it arises from such experience, belongs to it, and it ensues from an abandonment of the rigidity of knowledge's boundaries. In its unlimited openness to that which happens, art reaches out for truth. It opens itself to an incessant procession of visions, and there is no intellectual, emotional, or existential ban on the "being of the work of art itself." (19)

Beauty allows us to reach for a unique, personal, and existential understanding, thus bringing us closer to discovering the vital truth – the truth about who we are. Somewhat in line with Keats, Holda delightfully elucidates: "Beauty inspires one to think of what is good and of the way it wins us over to itself, impelling, at the same time, a feeling that the beautiful is true. We conceive of the beautiful as that which is true since beauty amazes us and discloses the truth about Being" (Holda 2021, 264). Unravelling Woolf's and Gadamer's stance on the intertwining of the transcendentals of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, Holda discloses that, by moving the deepest elements within those that encounter it, manifestations of Beauty lead us towards experiencing other transcendentals. Constituting a bridge between the real and the ideal, Beauty is a mundane expression of the spiritual. By exposing ourselves to Beauty's powerful force, we open ourselves to the most direct experience of the ideals. Beauty directly influences the human soul as it induces us to experience, rather than conceptually analyse, those ideals. This, in turn, awakens us to the need to live our lives authentically: "As human beings, we sense that to live our lives authentically we need that which traverses the circumscriptions of the earthly and the mundane. The need for authentication arises from the transcendent reality which calls us to partake in something greater than the easily attainable" (Holda 2021, 267). Beauty thus awakens us to the deeper realization of the "ethics of the human existential situation."

Holda's stress on Beauty's capability to authenticate human existence constitutes her unique contribution to the debate on the relationship between Beauty and ethics. A recurring, albeit not explicit, theme in *Beauty as a Mode of Being*, Beauty's ethical potential is signalled subtly, through gentle exploration of human existence as bound to ethical aesthetics. From the hermeneutical perspective, each action is an ethical action – whether the actor realizes it or not. However, Beauty, through its potential to open us up to a more profound understanding of reality, ourselves, and our situation, brings about a greater awareness of the ethics of our existence and our radical existential responsibility:

beauty often serves as the entrance to a more profound understanding of reality and sensitizes a human being to the action that needs to be taken in the situation of ethical choice.... Beauty and its alluring force are not superficial; rather, they affect the most intimate spaces of human being's mind and soul, and thus predispose him/ her to a deeper awareness of potentially ethically bound situations, the morally right or wrong. By making us more exposed to the importance of our existence, beauty calls for a more involved understanding and our decision as for what is right in situations enveloped in doubt and uncertainty. (60)

Gadamer's stress on self-recognition and discovery of a vital truth 'about the self and for the self' in Beauty and Woolf's belief in Beauty's potential to retrieve us to our innermost selves and connect us to the world in most profound ways entails that Beauty always inspires, invites and challenges us to live authentically and responsibly. It prompts us to realize that it is our existential, and thus ethical, imperative to disclose our unique identities in action and thought and not simply follow an imposed set of rules.

Holda's book is an unparalleled meditation on Beauty, as well as its manifestation. It is an exciting contribution to studies on both Gadamer and Woolf, and its profoundly interdisciplinary character allows us to look at the writings of both authors from new and fascinating angles. Instead of merely comparing the two authors or reading Woolf through a Gadamerian "framework," Holda enters a conversation with them as well as invites them to converse with one another. Holda's hermeneutic reading of Gadamer and Woolf allows us to reflect on our ways of understanding and responding to Beauty and Being. It makes us reconsider the meaning of Beauty and see it, against the sceptics and the cynics, as more than frivolous or purely pleasure-inducing. Beauty does not play a merely marginal or instrumental role in our lives, nor is it a simple ornament or a confirmation of social or intellectual status. It is, instead, as Holda discloses in her exchange with Woolf and Gadamer, the essence of the authentication of our Being. Beauty opens us up and stimulates us to see more than the immediately available. It inspires us to imagine, dream, and act toward the other and the infinite. It plays a fundamental role in our formation and trans-formation. By stimulating care and refinement of the soul, Beauty inevitably induces care for the other and the world. It is of profound intellectual, psychological, and spiritual significance whether we respond to the call of Beauty and allow it to grab and transform us. Without unnecessary pathos, moralism, or sentimentalism, *On Beauty and Being* helps us comprehend Dostoyevsky's Prince Mishkin in his confident that "Beauty will save the world." It also

engages us to recognize why the arts/humanities, when directed towards opening up horizons of experience of Beauty, are so crucial in our despaired and polarized world. The book will be of great interest to scholars interested in aesthetics, hermeneutics, literary theory, and anyone who appreciates Beauty and strives to understand it.

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