

## BOOK REVIEW

William Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 354pp.

In *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, William Desmond continues his life-long project of dwelling in the incarnate with an openness to what is communicated within it as well as to what may lay beyond it. In this work, beauty and the passion of being are the matters upon which he dwells. It is through this dwelling and with an emphasis upon what Desmond calls humanity's "primal porosity to being" (3) that he explores how beauty is able to communicate of itself as well as beyond itself, perhaps to the Divine self.

Expanding upon its communicative capacity, in addition to offering a kind working definition of beauty, Desmond writes: "Beauty ever gathers to itself and ever points away, points beyond itself. It communicates an open wholeness, or an opening of transcending in a surplus wholeness that cannot be enclosed within itself." (49). As a form of communication, "the surface of life and the depth enigmatically communicate" (67). For Desmond, beauty is an incarnate fullness that most often expresses itself in sensuous form, but which can never be restricted to the realm of the incarnate or the sensuous. The surplus or, as Desmond will often stress, the gratuitous nature of the value discovered in beauty is an equally important feature of its fullness.

As part of the work, and in keeping with his intellectual journey as a whole, Desmond frames beauty as a response not simply to modernity, but to a culture of relativism and the influences of post-modern thinking. Beauty highlights a fundamental form of goodness within reality and thereby counteracts the view that reality ought to be understood as a product of human construction. *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being* offers beauty as a witness against relativism and as a challenge to both modern and post-modern thinking by illustrating how beauty reveals a depth of value within reality that exists prior to and extends beyond human efforts to define value.

Yet, as those who know Desmond's works will recognize, he does not operate with a naïve or romanticized approach to his subject matter. In this work, as in his others, Desmond proves as adept at embracing fundamental forms of goodness within reality as he is at entering into a dialogue with profound forms of darkness. The chapter on Schopenhauer, along with the Nietzsche conversation that takes place within it, is a good example of such a dialogue. Recognizing the way in which beauty, particularly as it is found within nature and the animal kingdom (25), can astound, but also constitute a danger to human life is another way in which Desmond avoids an overly sentimentalized treatment of his subject matter. All of this is to say that any reader who appreciates a complex, thoughtful, and even daring intellectual treatment of beauty should be excited to read this book.

In laying claim to the work's overall objective, Desmond seeks to reawaken a sense of wonder and appreciation for various forms of beauty. Consistent with the complexity and wide-ranging nature of his thought, such forms refer not simply to different mediums in which beauty can take shape—natural, artistic, ethical, spiritual—but to the relevance of these forms to culture, religious worldviews, ontology, metaphysics, historical analysis, lived experience, and other areas.

That a reawakening of wonder is a necessary or pertinent endeavor relates to a tenet of Desmond's philosophy. In a mode of thinking that Desmond has mastered, he combines an exploration of his subject matter, in this case beauty's elemental goodness, with a philosophical–historical–cultural–religious analysis that traces humanity increasingly becoming closed to, but never completely cut off from, elemental forms of goodness. For Desmond, the history of modern philosophy, along with the Western civilization that it both reflects and shapes, is a story of humanity's aspiration for autonomy. Such an aspiration simultaneously involves a closure to, or, at the very least, a diminishment of, that which extends beyond humanity's powers of self-determination. In advocating for a more radical form of openness as connected with beauty, most especially an openness to its religious possibilities, Desmond stands opposed to a relationship to being that he views as prevalent in Western humanity's contemporary intellectual culture.

Such an effort makes a review of this work in *Marcel Studies* a natural fit. Insofar as Desmond stresses virtues such as openness, a profound respect for givenness, and an appreciation for life as a between, Desmond and Marcel share a profoundly similar intellectual path. The same could be said about their complimentary critiques of autonomy, a sense of the incarnate and the singular as possessing an inexhaustible value, and their shared attentiveness to lived experience. Given such attentiveness, it is not surprising that Marcel wrote dramatic plays and that Desmond, while being more of systematic philosopher than Marcel, nonetheless is as comfortable reflecting upon drama and art as Marcel is at producing it. For both thinkers, humanity's given reality pulsates with a value that speaks to the inherent worth of our given reality while also harboring a fullness that cannot be understood if restricted to the domain of incarnate existence.

So as to draw out these themes in relation to Desmond's treatment of beauty, his and Marcel's profound respect for givenness is a worthy starting point. Desmond speaks of being struck by the beautiful: "In beholding something beautiful there is a kind of 'beholding from': something is communicated to us. There is also in such beholding a resting in something worthy to be affirmed, indeed something worthy of a kind of festive consent and celebration. The offering of beauty is not simply a result of our activity—it comes to us" (115). Givenness, here instantiated in the form of beauty, constitutes an opportunity to affirm a good beyond humanity's own making. Desmond, like Marcel, seeks to draw his readers back to a foundation/starting point whose value is constituted, at least in part, by not being a product of humanity's own creation. Prior to any human efforts and prior to any reconstruction of society, nature, or self, we wake up in an existence that possesses value.

Desmond further develops this point, along with invoking his characteristic philosophical–historical analysis in doing so, when he writes: "Givenness as such is a notion often rejected in modernity . . . . If there is a given, it does not count as significant till we reconfigure or reconstruct it in accord with our determination of significance or worth. Nothing is to be accepted as such unless we give it to ourselves. We call the shots . . . . [S]o beauty as given is less well attended to in an ethos where we stress the constructive activity of the human being" (114). In drawing his readers back to the primordial or pre-constructed value of given reality, Desmond is not simply pointing out that givenness possesses value, but that the failure to recognize this truth generates a deformed attitude toward being in general and beauty in particular. As Desmond notes, "In this [modern and contemporary] view, we are not gifted with being what we are; we make our being" (53). The author articulates this same theme and applies it to a contemporary cultural issue when he writes of the "cosmetic surgery industry: the language of industry shows the overtaking of elemental beauty by an economic project of reconstruction. We will not accept ourselves. Rather than love, we negate what is given and love only what we construct" (53). The deformation that

occurs in rejecting the given as worthy of affirmation, along with the concomitant privileging of autonomy and self-construction, involves human beings increasingly operating within a reality that lacks intrinsic value. As Desmond is fond of pointing out, any effort to maintain the value of existence via human effort is bedeviled by the fact that such efforts cannot possess an ultimate value if the whole in which those efforts take place lacks value.

While the metaphysics that underlie modernity evacuate value from the given so as to embrace autonomy, and while the metaphysics that underlie postmodernity reject autonomy along with the givenness of value in favor of a dominion of difference, Desmond remains attentive to primordial/pre-constructed forms of value. Lack of such attentiveness, for Desmond, elicits the reactionary and ultimately bitter trumpeting of the ugly or disjointed in post-modern art. It also leads to what Desmond describes as an “asking too much of art: namely, asking for a kind of substitute for strong transcendence, but in terms that perhaps art alone cannot carry—cannot carry, especially if the mindfulness of the more richly sacred sense of the world and the human being is progressively being hollowed out” (328). For Desmond, the longing for beauty remains even if the beauty of the given has been “progressively . . . hollowed out.” In *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, the hollowing out not only serves to deny the ontological reality of beauty or its existential import, but to redirect our longing for beauty to misplaced and emaciated forms of beauty.

Against the backdrop of a culture in which the value of given reality and the hope of ultimate fulfillment has been diminished and in which the longing for such value can take deformed and desperate routes, Desmond establishes beauty as an antidote. He writes of how beauty “can take our breath away and arouse wonder, that is to say, renew astonishment at the marvelous gift of life itself” (89). By eliciting a wonder that “can take our breath away,” beauty operates beneath and/or prior to our will. Hence, “Beauty arrests us, and for a pause we are taken out of ourselves, sometimes lost in the enchantment of something marvelous before us” (44). For Desmond, beauty challenges a denial or deformation of the good by placing one before a reality which manifests the good. The manner in which this challenge takes place also serves to undermine autonomy. As it is for Marcel, a spirit of autonomy is contested not by an act of will, but by a kind of grace that immerses the human person in a reality which possesses value and of which he/she is neither the creator nor the master.

Highlighting the wide-ranging nature of Desmond’s intellect, he builds upon this insight with a fascinating analysis of laughter. He writes, “Something about laughter dissolves our mastery over ourselves. There is an element of the involuntary that upends our endeavor to be (ourselves)” (281). This loss of control, rather than being thought of as a lapse or a deficiency to be overcome, is presented as a joyous release, a release into a reality greater and richer than oneself. Laughter and comedy find a place in Desmond’s treatment of beauty, insofar as they come to represent an affirmation of being prior to our willing of any such affirmation. There is a good to which we respond and this response undermines a restriction of the good to a process or product of our own making. Desmond makes similar points in reference to music (117) and in his chapter on theater (Ch. 8).

Beauty acts as a testament to a depth of value that speaks both to the intrinsic worth of incarnate reality as well as “creation as the generosity of being, the plenitude of the excessive good” (211). Yet the portrait would not be complete, nor true to our status as beings in the between, or, as Marcel would term it, as persons who are *homo viator*, if the threat to beauty were not taken seriously. As previously mentioned, Desmond takes on this threat in relation to Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. As part of this discussion, Desmond explores how beauty can be framed as the

concealment of truth, namely, the truth of existence's primordial darkness. He writes, "Is this then what beauty is: music wrung from hell, concealing hell as it is, and making it look like a heaven?" (96). The threat to beauty is simultaneously framed as the threat of beauty. The threat to and of beauty is that beauty speaks not to the truth of existence, but to the concealment of such truth.

Desmond pursues a number of avenues in response to this challenge. First, he speaks of beauty as a kind of hidden well-spring that both remains operative beneath as well as makes intelligible the celebration of the ugly and disjointed in contemporary culture (64, 71). As a second point, and given humanity's status as a being in the between, Desmond reframes a dark origin in terms of a power that exceeds the ability of autonomous rationality to comprehend. The dark origin can be thus understood as a mysterious origin (181). As a final example, Desmond talks about beauty not as a façade for hell, but as a breaking through of the good into the tragedies and sorrows that beset human existence. He even offers an account where beauty breaks into hell itself (97).

One criticism of Desmond's overall discussion is that at times there is a disjointed feel to the work. Certain investigations appear to be more related to side projects than to a central theme. One gets the impression that the text represents a series of essays that were written for other purposes, but then collected into a single volume. Within the course of the text as a whole, this worry is a relatively minor concern given the family resemblance of the chapters and the incredible range of topics associated with the subject matter. However, there are times, such as Desmond's chapter on soul versus self music, where less could be more. In that chapter, the author adopts a tenuous analogy. He likens the relationship between porosity and autonomy to that of soul music versus the absence of a form of art called self-music. The tenuous nature of the analogy is based upon the fact that music can adopt self-referential formulations. This is most explicit in hip-hop music, but it is certainly not confined to that form. The overarching point is that there exist underdeveloped lines of argument that might have been omitted so as to generate a smoother and more focused reading experience.

Nevertheless, this book will clearly be of value to those who wish to reflect upon a compelling philosophical affirmation of existence. The text also acts as a worthy challenge to those who withhold such an affirmation, particularly with regard to those who deny the existence of fundamental forms of value/goodness within reality. Given the troubled times in which we live, as well as a culture that increasingly denies the existence of fundamental forms of value, truth, goodness, and beauty in lieu of an emphasis upon relativism, individualism, and secular ends, this work serves as a sweet and important reminder. Desmond is convincing in his view that there is reason to treat beauty as a testament to the worth of incarnate existence and as an intimation of an absolute good.

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