

**Malgorzata Holda, *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful*, Peter Lang, Berlin 2021, pp. 310, € 55.59, ISBN 9783631830185**

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Malgorzata Holda's recent work *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful* takes the inherent unity of Being and beauty as a clue to examine the convergence between Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics and Woolf's literary discourses. The book is organized into three parts; each section entails one particular dimension of Gadamer's aesthetic thought is elaborated in relation to one of Woolf's representative novels. These dimensions include the proximity of truth to beauty, beauty's repeatability and restorability, and the poetic word's compelling disclosure of being.

Leading straight to the book's central thesis, the first chapter demonstrates how Gadamer and Woolf share a similar view on the interconnection between beauty and truth, and how this interconnection has its roots in Greek philosophy, particularly that of Plato. Holda first discusses Gadamer's retrieval of Plato's idea of beauty and its paradigmatic components – transcendence, radiance, and measure. The accent of discussion is placed on Gadamer's appropriation of the former two, closely-related qualities, namely beauty's self-presentation and radiance (or, illumination). In accordance with Heidegger's rehabilitation of *aletheia*, Gadamer characterizes beauty's radiance as an interplay of revealing and concealing. Artistic presentation illuminates something in such a way that it comes into existence, and at the same time, makes this truth of being accessible for our experience. In that sense, beauty's self-presentation is essentially related to Being's self-evidence.

Examining Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Holda argues that Woolf, like Gadamer, conceives "beauty as ontologically rooted in and inseparable from Being" rather than as "a superficial adornment added to human existence and

detached from lived experience” (p. 102). Woolf’s novel depicts the two protagonists’ marriage as a metaphorical representation of the unity of *kalon* – represented by Mrs. Ramsay who has an ideal female beauty and practical wisdom – and *aletheia* – represented by Mr. Ramsay, the professional philosopher who strives for certain truths. Mrs. Ramsay’s enlightening impact on Mr. Ramsay, which transforms his rational thinking into a more genuine experience of reality, amplifies the indispensability of beauty to truth. Also relating truth and beauty, Holda writes that the imagery of light represents both the beauty of light and beauty’s illuminating capacity to bring forth truth and transform human existence. One of the most important scenes in Woolf’s novel, the dinner party, entails an intertextual echo of Plato’s *Symposium* and his allegory of the cave. This scene demonstrates the party guests’ ongoing request for genuine knowledge of reality.

After demonstrating how Gadamer’s ontological explanation of beauty is shared by Woolf, part two continues with a focused discussion of beauty’s repeatable character and restorative capacity. Referring to Gadamer’s concepts of play and festival, Holda interprets the structural doublings that Woolf deploys in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) as imitations of the recurring paradigms of both natural phenomena and human activities. By repeatedly switching back and forth between the dual storylines, Woolf’s characters perpetually find themselves in an “interplay of flashbacking and foreshadowing” (p. 191), and this enables them to reflect on the past. Through this dynamic, the beautiful reveals not only “the overall scheme of the eternal renewal that [Woolf] recognizes as the staple foundation of Being” (p. 155), but also its restorative capacity to illuminate a deepened awareness of Being, an intensified acceptance of one’s finitude, as well as a closer connectedness with the other.

Holda then argues that Gadamer and Woolf’s shared conception of the repeatability of beauty implies a shared conception of time’s circularity. However, Holda only elaborates on the Gadamerian concepts of play and festival, leaving out his account of the temporality of aesthetic being and therefore the fundamental differences between Gadamer’s and Woolf’s conceptions of time. To be more specific, Gadamer speaks about ontological time while Woolf prioritizes psychological time. As Holda notices, “through the

employment of the stream of consciousness technique, [Woolf] prioritizes the personal, individuated perception of time, and, as a result, she frames her rendition of time around a subjective view of it” (p. 185). For Woolf, psychological time flows with the stream of consciousness. By contrast, Gadamer conceives time as an inner dimension of being instead of a subjective perception. To come into existence means to become present in time. Thus, for Gadamer, the fusion of the past and the present that characterizes the presence of being is ontologically presupposed instead of psychologically constructed.

Another divergence between Gadamer and Woolf might lie in whether time is experienced as circular. For Gadamer, time – or more precisely, fulfilled time – is not linear, but neither would it be circular. In terms of the repeatable life patterns, Woolf speaks of the human inexhaustive attempt to “grasp fuller the sense of Being by means of coming back to that which has already been examined to understand more, better and in a new way” (p. 149). Here, since it always involves a turning back to the past, time is circular. For Gadamer, the fusion of the past and the present consists not in returning to the past, but on the contrary, in the past’s returning to the present. His concept of contemporaneity precisely pinpoints art’s capacity to transcend temporal restrictions and become completely present, no matter how remote its historical origin is. Thus, it is “the vivid presentness and contemporaneity of art” (Gadamer 2007, p. 200), instead of the subjective intention to rehabilitate the past, that constitutes and maintains art’s eternal renewability. For Gadamer, the experience of fulfilled time is different from that of the ordinary experience of time succession that is at our disposal and whose duration can be calculated. The time associated with being is experienced more like undurational moments, i.e., the open spaces raised above passing time where the coming-to-existence event takes place.

The final part of Holda’s book probes the ontological significance of the poetic word. Heidegger connects contemplative thinking (*Denken*) with poetizing (*Dichten*) and conceives poetry as a gateway to being. Following Heidegger, Gadamer defines the poetic word as speaking forth (*Aussage*), by which being finds its fulfillment in its “being-as-saying”. Holda argues that Woolf’s lyrical novel, *The Waves* (1931), precisely exemplifies how being reveals itself and speaks forth

in poetic words. Critics regard the novel as an experimental work that blurs the boundaries between prose and poetry. The novel brings forth the expression of sensory experiences and internal contemplation through ambiguous soliloquies, metaphorical language, and impressionistic imagery – particularly that of the sea. In Holda’s words, “Gadamer’s explication of the forgetfulness of Being sheds light on the acute sense of incompleteness and the need for completion which Woolf’s poetic narratives dramatize. [...] Woolf’s characters are portrayed as journeying for home in their poignant sense of a lack of completion away from Being” (pp. 221-222). The sea represents the primordial home, the ontological order to which we belong. To return to unity with the sea means to be there again in being’s disclosures. Exemplifying “being-in-the world as being-at-sea” (p. 240), Woolf’s lyrical novel manifests poetic language as a unique presentation through which the encounter with the truth of being happens.

In this book, Holda examines firstly Plato’s legacy in Gadamer and Woolf’s mutual understanding of the proximity between beauty and being; then, beauty’s restorative capacity discerned in the repetitive paradigm of the universe; and finally, poetry’s unique role as the gateway to being. Holda demonstrates comprehensive knowledge and intriguing insights into both Gadamer’s philosophical thought and Woolf’s literary works. The book presents itself as a powerful theoretical justification for Woolf’s experimental literature and at the same time a practical exemplification of Gadamer’s relevance in the field of literary study. Undoubtedly, the study is itself an intriguing example of the interconnection between thinking and poetizing.

## **Bibliography**

Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader*, Richard E. Palmer (ed.), Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2007

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