

BOOK REVIEW

Knepper, Steven E., *Wonder Strikes: Approaching Aesthetics and Literature with William Desmond*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022, 273 pp.

This book, with its appealing title, promises to be a study of William Desmond's aesthetics. The author describes his goal as "an introduction to Desmond's philosophy as well as a more focused study of his aesthetic concerns." He continues, "It aims both to orient newcomers and to offer texture to those who already know Desmond's work well" and promises to "presuppose no prior knowledge of Desmond's philosophy. This study can serve as a primer for those who want to make their way into it" (p.6). This reviewer is a newcomer to Desmond's work, and so cannot attest to the book's success in offering texture. It does, however, fall a little short of the promise to presuppose no prior knowledge, perhaps too high a challenge for the author to set himself in any case since Desmond's ideas are intricate and often complex. At times, Desmond's work seems more suited to the narrowly focused professional philosopher and not for, as Plato has it, people who use the language of the marketplace.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part takes up Desmond's aesthetic ideas in general, which requires also a discussion of his broader understanding of the world and human beings' place in it. He emphasizes human beings' "porosity," the interchange that human beings have with things around them through their senses and their deeper interior lives which has both aesthetic and ethical repercussions. Because of this porosity, human beings should be receptive to what is around them, which leads to an awareness of the "excess of being." That receptivity is affirming both of the receiver and what is received. This receiving of the "too-muchness" of being can cause wonder to strike and to "unclog our porosity." There are different kinds of wonder: astonished wonder, perplexity, and curiosity. Beauty especially elicits astonished wonder by bringing our attention to the singularity of things and the richness of their being. Art, as a singular thing, is effective in eliciting wonder.

The second part of the book, "Reading in the Between," brings Desmond's aesthetic theory to bear especially on literature. It offers a "metaxological" approach to literature. The first chapter traces the possibilities of epiphanies in literature. Here, it seems, Knepper is more concerned with developing Desmond's aesthetics and its implications for literature, rather than in introducing Desmond's thought. He writes, "Desmond does not offer a specific account of such epiphanies, but his treatments of wonder, or human relations, and of the overdetermined artwork are amenable to one" (p.131). The following two chapters take up the relations between tragedy and philosophy, and then between comedy and philosophy. Knepper offers some intriguing analyses of literature as he illuminates these relations; for his discussion of tragedy, he examines *MacBeth* and *King Lear*, while for his discussion of comedy he considers *Moby-Dick* – "a tragic work," he says, "that is nonetheless full of laughter" (p.175) and *A Christmas Carol*. These last two chapters are the strongest in the book and well worth reading.

A difficulty of reading the book is the use of terms that Desmond has coined. While it is understandable that the author would use Desmond's own terminology to describe his thought,

they are often unusual or even counter-intuitive expressions referring to concepts that need a great deal of explanation before they may be clear to the reader. These terms are given only the briefest of introductions, however. An index of terms or concepts would have helped the reader navigate better through the use of complicated terminology, but its absence makes reading later parts of this book without reading the earlier parts very challenging. Nevertheless, Knepper's interaction with a wide range of thinkers is impressive. He draws on and quotes a vast assortment of philosophers, literary critics, authors, and artists. A favorite mode of his is to offer lists of thinkers and their ideas, in which one sentence is given to one thinker and a summary of a pertinent idea apiece, though sometimes these are too brief to be informative.

There are several references to Marcel, who Knepper identifies as "a major but largely neglected influence on Desmond" (p.6). These references indicate much agreement between Desmond and Marcel: a passage from *Creative Fidelity* in which Marcel describes feeling "impermeable" draws a connection with Desmond's idea of "clogged porosity"; Desmond "agrees ... with Marcel, who holds that humans have an ontological need for real connection that transcends our physical needs and narrow self-interest" (p.18); Desmond's notion of "agapeic mind" is "similar to what Marcel calls *disponibilité*" (p.22); Desmond and Marcel both reject Kant's emphasis on autonomy; in regard to the human capacity for evil, Desmond considers it "less a problem to be solved and more a mystery to be lived, to use Marcel's distinction" (p.111); Desmond and Marcel both see love as pointing the way to God through being drawn into communion with others. There is a somewhat more extended application of Marcel's thought in the discussion of "The Poetry of Place" as a way of highlighting the way in which Sarah Orne Jewett's novel, *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, shows the way in which someone can take the stance of "having" a place rather than "being in" a place, which is an idea also found in Desmond.

Readers will likely wish for a more extended conversation between the ideas of Marcel and Desmond, and also for a more critically reflective approach to Desmond's ideas overall, since Knepper's style is mostly expository and comparative rather than, it seems, being concerned with the truth of the deeper philosophical questions. Nevertheless, the book is a fine introduction to a range of influential ideas in an important modern thinker relating to wonder, beauty, art, literature, and the need for transcendence.

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