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**The Beauty in Art as a Gateway to the Appearance of the Truthfulness of Existence. *On Beauty and Being: Hans-Georg Gadamer's and Virginia Woolf's Hermeneutics of the Beautiful*, by Małgorzata Hołda, Peter Lang GmbH, Berlin 2021, pp. 310**

**Abstract.** The book develops the current hermeneutic discourse concerning the notions of beauty and Being. It includes a discussion of melancholic beauty and its interconnection with the act of art's creation. According to M. Hołda, the writings of both authors demonstrate a treatment of beauty based on ancient Greek thought, especially from the times of Plato and Aristotle. Gadamer reaffirms the intimate relationship between beauty and Being, which is also revealed in Woolf's literary work.

**Keywords:** beauty; being; Hans-Georg Gadamer; hermeneutics

In her insightful book on beauty and Being, Hołda presents a renewed point of view regarding the issue of beauty and its implications for human existence. She does this through the unique fictional writing of Virginia Woolf (1882-1942) and its correlation with the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1990-2002). With clarity and engagement, Hołda shows that Woolf and Gadamer share a similar worldview regarding the role of beauty and artwork in our lives. For that purpose, Hołda discusses the similarities between a variety of philosophical themes from Gadamer's philosophy and aspects of Woolf's fictional imaginings. The book develops the current hermeneutic discourse concerning the notions of beauty and Being. It includes a discussion of melancholic beauty and its interconnection with the act of art's creation. According to Hołda, the writings of both authors demonstrate a treatment of beauty based on ancient Greek thought, especially from the times of Plato and Aristotle. Gadamer reaffirms the intimate relationship between beauty and Being, which is also revealed in Woolf's literary work.

Hołda draws our attention to the Gadamerian philosophy of art as resting on the notion of play, which is the metaphor for the reader's lived experience of lingering in front of an artwork. Therefore, the aesthetic experience is an event where the linguistic material combines with human fragility and openness to beauty (p. 262-263). The fusion of the horizon of artwork and that of the reader/viewer provides, at the same time, a creative bridge between thought and a worldview. Following Gadamer, Hołda asserts that "all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event" (p. 19). This way of viewing an artwork (e.g., a poem) accords with Woolf's literary approach, which is exceptional in its use of a specific writing style defined as a "stream of consciousness technique" (p. 16-17). Woolf's way of telling a story allows for the truth of Being to be disclosed – it is revealed as dwelling in the characters' consciousness. In this respect, there is a correlation between the 'stream of consciousness' and Gadamer's phenomenological approach regarding the role of beauty in human existence (p. 20).<sup>1</sup> As a literary technique, the 'stream of consciousness' enables Woolf to create a complex tapestry of thoughts, whose coming together into a complete world picture in the reader's consciousness becomes slowly apparent by being understood in retrospect. The reader is expected to reflect on the text to understand the world he/she lives in.<sup>2</sup> By identifying the affinities between Gadamer and Woolf, Hołda examines the relevance of beauty in human existence<sup>3</sup> and combines it with the study of the poetic space that Woolf creates in her writing, particularly in her novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *The Waves*. Thus, Hołda moves from philosophy to literature, and from literature back to philosophy. Gadamer attributes to consciousness the

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1 In the spirit of Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and his approach to the work of art.

2 From Virginia Woolf's *Diaries*, it is apparent that as early as 1926 her interest in mental life led her to a writing style which exposes the ways of human thinking and its characteristics (Woolf 2010, 287; Bell 1988, 302, 328).

3 See: Gadamer 1986.

ability to be open to multifarious understandings due to the influence of aesthetics (beauty) on rationality.<sup>4</sup> After Gadamer, Holda addresses the oneness of truth (*alêtheia*) and beauty (*kalon*), in the spirit of the discourse regarding Eros in Plato's feast (p. 55-125). According to Gadamer's hermeneutical approach, the relationship between beauty and truth is exposed in a synchronous revelation, when the human being facing the phenomenon says: "Yes, this is it!" This approach is exemplified in Virginia Woolf's writing style (p. 264-265).<sup>5</sup> The style and the structure of *To the Lighthouse* endorse the story's content – they enhance the tension created between logical and emotional understandings; between literary verballity and illustrative visibility; between the symbolism of the lighthouse as 'showing the way' and the distance kept from it that emphasizes the melancholic beauty (p. 98-102), thus expressed in Woolf's own words: "I am unable to deal with symbolism, except in this blurred, generalized manner" (Bell 1988, 324).<sup>6</sup>

As Holda's discussion of the theme of beauty finds a clear parallel between Gadamer, the philosopher, and Woolf, the writer, we can say, that from a literary point of view *To the Lighthouse* embodies, in both content and structure, the idea of the Gadamerian fusion

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4 According to Gadamer, the combination of praxis and theory – 'practical experience' as action vis-à-vis 'rational thought' as theory – allows us to reaffirm prejudices (Gadamer 2006, 267-305). This phenomenological approach prompts us to extend the phenomenological discourse (Miron 2013, 172-173). For Gadamer, this approach became possible following Heidegger's hermeneutical turn; a change that brought art back to the forefront of the philosophical stage (Gadamer 2006, 1-157).

5 After all, Woolf wrote the novel with the fluency that suited the way she wrote her diaries; with a fluency whose loveliness is clear in her statement "I live inside it in my entirety" (Woolf 2010, 272, 281-283; Bell 1988, 43-50).

6 As mentioned earlier, Woolf aims in her literary approach to cause the reader to read in a hesitant manner, necessitating many re-readings. This type of reading causes the creation of the entire story as a prose in the reader's mind, through the poetic elements, allowing for associative thoughts. Evidence of this approach can be found in Woolf's *Diaries* while she was writing *To the Lighthouse* (Woolf 2010, 300). Thus, *To the Lighthouse* becomes a story based on a demand for the reader's involvement (Holda 2021, 266).

of horizons. That is, through the possibility of bringing together different modes of understanding, the reader can create for himself/herself a worldview that has clarity and meaning. We can also say that this approach reflects the ancient argument between philosophy and art, which began in Plato's days. The narrative of *To the Lighthouse* is based on the fusion of thought and feeling. The story revolves around two main axes: the first expresses the relationship between logical understanding (which is linear) and intuitive understanding (which is rhizomatic). The latter expresses the relationship between the narrative's verbal language and the drawing's visual language. That is, Woolf creates her story in the reader's consciousness through the tension between dedicated thought and reflective thought, according to the criteria of Western culture.<sup>7</sup> According to Gadamer, both perspectives are blended in the reader's consciousness into a story that deals with the dilemmas and essence of the creative process, be it narrative or pictorial. Based on Woolf's literary discourse and Gadamer's philosophy, the problematic that Hołda's book tackles combines aesthetic aspects and story-telling wisdom and provides a creative place for the reader's consciousness games. Thus, Hołda shows that the intermediary space created between the theme of beauty and the theme of existence allows for the revelation of truths explored by philosophy and evaluated on an *Ars-poetica* basis. In other words, the issue of beauty is revealed in poetic writing; there, in a language creating new connections, we can find the gate to an understanding of human existence (p. 266, 269).

Hołda believes that beauty is "a mode of being" revealed in its ontological oneness with Being. Her treatment of the topic is part of her research on the hermeneutic encounters between literary and philosophical texts. Following Gadamer, Hołda brings into dialogue

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7 An echo of this can be found in her *Diaries*, in the description of the relationship between her parents, as well as the quality of the relationship between herself and Vita Sackville-West (Woolf 2010, 266, 278; Bell 1988, 31-32).

her insights on the role of beauty from her lived experience and those relating to each one of us as interpretative beings. Her study begins with the theme of longing as a basis for change, which characterizes *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, and relates to the Western discourse, which is not free of contradictions, while regarding the place of beauty side by side with truth and goodness.

In her inimitable way, Hołda speaks about beauty as experienced on the threshold of a metaphysics of presence that deals with the relationship between the experience of belonging and its negation, or between the sensation of being at home and not-being-at-home-yet. In this respect, she finds the theme of beauty to be suitable, even if only partially, for an examination of Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics, as well as of Woolf's literary discourse. According to Hołda, both writers focus on beauty's winning power in the moment of decision regarding exposure to the truth in an aesthetic encounter.

As Hołda claims, for Gadamer art is an invitation to an encounter with truth, while we remain open to the given hidden in our lived experience. Woolf's narratives exemplify this approach. In her work, an invitation to an encounter with truth is noticeable in the merger of general cultural knowledge and intuition, allowing the reader to (re)construct existential situations that include truth.

The first part of the book examines *To the Lighthouse* and explores the affinity between beauty and truth in a Platonic manner. Hołda begins with a Gadamerian validation of the connection between beauty and truth (as *alêtheia*) and proceeds with the theme of light and beauty, which is examined in the relationship between the verbal and the visual, as the storyline moves toward the banquet scene. Hołda finds similarities between the dinner scene and the Platonic feast. Due to the elusiveness of melancholic beauty, the closeness between beauty and truth reaches its pinnacle. According to Hołda, the intimate encounter of the reader with the artwork defies the possibility of a univocal interpretation. And, thus, it allows the reader

to change his/her worldview from within the playing space that opens with the very experience of reading.

In the second part, Hołda's book addresses beauty's capacity to impact human consciousness that operates between the near and the far, and between the finite and the infinite, in the space of the appearance of truth, where the circle of understanding is closed with the declaration: "This is it!" According to Hołda, for both Gadamer and Woolf, this revelation is exposed with great liveliness in the uniqueness of the poetic language. The effortless and intentionless aesthetic experience is unveiled in the performative 'existence' of the work of art – in the ecstasy of the moment when the reader is confronted with a variety of modes of understanding based on readings and re-readings. These insights, which are firmly grounded in the theme of beauty, bring together Literature and Philosophy into a complementary relationship, encouraging dialogue within the interpretive space. Gadamer calls this the 'fusion of horizons.'

The third part of the book tackles the question of the equilibrium of consciousness in the poetic lingual space as an active entrance into a situation of suspension of understanding. In this spirit, the Heideggerian mode of understanding guides Gadamer toward hermeneutics, which permits a dynamic understanding and provides the reader with a place for his/her reading. Hołda connects this approach to Woolf's *The Waves*, acknowledging its lyrical-poetic strength. We encounter Gadamer's idea of the fusion of horizons here as a coming together of language forces, as well as forces of existence, beneath the practical possibilities that beauty affords in Woolf's writing, which touches on beauty, the transcendent, and the poetic.

Throughout her book, Hołda emphasizes the theme of beauty as an aspect connecting Gadamer's philosophical thought and Woolf's writing. Her conclusion is that beauty and existence have a mutual relationship of belonging and influence. According to Hołda, Woolf attempts to create a portrait of beauty by mixing and deepening the understanding of human subjectivity in all its fragility with the

‘material’ of language. In other words, one’s limitations and language are what allow one to know himself/herself as much as possible. The theme of beauty is spelled out through a variety of modes of understanding, but melancholic beauty is revealed as a threshold space between the exposed and the hidden. In this respect, melancholy is viewed as a means of approaching human creativity.

For Gadamer, as well as for Woolf, the aesthetic encounter awakens in the viewer an ecstatic feeling, crossing ‘a given road’ of existence, creating the possibility of an alternative mode of understanding. It seems that for the philosopher and the writer, the role of beauty in the Western world is to support the development of the “I” into a humanistic self-identity through art, while dealing with a practice that allows one to circumvent what is considered ethical and thus also good.

In other words, in the spirit of the modern attitude to beauty, which favours a-symmetrical beauty and lack of harmony, the Platonic good does not remain a fixed idea. Moreover, for Gadamer the self is designed or changes radically in the circle of the aesthetic encounter, in a space where beauty moves between the symmetrical and the asymmetrical. At the same time, art has the transformative power that helps to promote the human spirit, as in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. For example, through the artist Lily Briscoe, Woolf’s philosophy of art is revealed as a discourse that enables constant change. Whereas for Gadamer the attitude toward beauty touches on the theme of eternal circularity and the status of the game, for Woolf the philosophy of beauty is embedded in the circles of life, serving the story – in the tempo of life, in the game of the times, in the socialization of relationships, in the space between the finite and the eternal. For both, understanding cannot be exhausted. Rather, the paradigm of existence between past and future, between looking back (as historical thinking) and looking to the future (as hypothetical thought), prompts an exposure of new hermeneutical

aspects (Gadamer), and an embodiment of the movement of human consciousness (Woolf).

Thus, by shifting between Gadamer's philosophy of art and Woolf's fiction, the way Hołda's book addresses the issue of beauty results in an interesting and enriching interpretive space regarding both discourses. Hołda examines the literary and philosophical discourses in a clear and insightful manner. Unfortunately, the book only provides an index of names, thus preventing the reader from getting quick access to key topics. In addition, the number of examples that do not serve her arguments could be reduced. Despite these minor drawbacks, Hołda's most important contribution in this book is a theoretical look at the intersection between Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics and Woolf's stream of consciousness style of writing. Here, Hołda exposes the connection between beauty and melancholy. By pointing to their commonalities, she clarifies for the reader the constant change accompanying the attitude toward beauty, as well as the movement between symmetrical and a-symmetrical approaches as one that enhances human creativity.

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