

## CLIMBING THE DARK: William Desmond on Wonder, the Cave, and the Underworld

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Plato's "quarrel" with poetry is well known. In the *Republic*, Socrates criticizes the Homeric epics, a cornerstone of Athenian education, for their obscene and ignoble depictions of the gods. He claims these depictions are likely to mislead the youth. Tragedies are not immune from Socrates' critique either. They stir unsavory emotions that unsettle the well-ordered soul. Most famously, Socrates critiques artistic imitation (*mimesis*). The painting or the poem is a copy of a copy of the Form. It is not anchored in real knowledge. A good carpenter can make a sound bed. A painter can make what appears to be a sound bed. The poet can describe a sound bed. But their depictions are misleading. Put either one in a workshop with tools and lumber, and they may well be at a loss. If they do construct a sturdy bed, it will be because they possess the art of carpentry, not because they are a painter or a poet. Mimetic art is alluring but misleads morally and cognitively. It appeals to an inferior part of the soul and is far removed from truth.

William Desmond is one of many scholars who argue that this account of Plato's relationship to art is too simplistic. There is ambivalence in the *Republic* and throughout the dialogues. There are also ironies that cannot be dismissed.

The dialogues themselves are poetic.<sup>1</sup> They make dramatic use of character and plot. They use myths like the story of the ring of Gyges. They also use images like the cave in the *Republic* or the winged chariot of the soul in the *Phaedrus*.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that the poetic image has an important place in both Plato's philosophy and philosophy as such, especially when trying to approach something as overdetermined as the Good. Desmond argues that no philosopher has bequeathed more poetic "imaginative universals"—a term borrowed from Giambattista Vico—to posterity than Plato:

But who has endowed the philosophical tradition more richly with its philosophical images, such as the Cave, the Sun, the winged soul, and so on? Do not these images present some of the imaginative universals of philosophy itself, to which thinkers return again and again, and not because [the images] are deficient in speculative reason but because something offers itself for thought that is in excess of the concept, even Hegel's.<sup>3</sup>

Such images spur continual thought and reflection. But they also, as Cyril O'Regan points out, involve "all levels of the self, the affective, sensory, erotic and somatic as well as the cognitive level."<sup>4</sup> While Plato may be the great critic of poetry, he is also the great poetic philosopher.<sup>5</sup> His work provides affordances for thinkers, like

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<sup>1</sup> See Vittorio Hösle, *The Philosophical Dialogue: A Poetics and a Hermeneutics*, trans. by Steven Rendall (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For a study of the winged chariot of the soul as an imaginative universal, see Douglas Hedley, *Living Forms of the Imagination* (London: T&T Clark, 2008). Desmond makes use of this imaginative universal throughout *Art, Origins, Otherness: Between Philosophy and Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003). In the concluding chapter art and religion become the wings of philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> William Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness*, 19-20. Desmond's first chapter in this study explores Plato as a poetic philosopher. On the complexities and ambivalences in Plato's treatment of art, see also Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Cyril O'Regan, "Repetition: Desmond's New Science," in *Between System and Poetics: William Desmond and Philosophy After Dialectic*, ed. by Thomas A. F. Kelly (Hants: Ashgate, 2007), 83. Desmond returns to Vico throughout *The Intimate Strangeness of Being: Metaphysics After Dialectic* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Desmond often names Plato and Nietzsche together as great poetic philosophers, underlining a similarity between the former and his great antagonist.

Desmond, who are more interested in the porosity between philosophy and poetry than their quarrels.<sup>6</sup>

Desmond himself continually returns to the cave and its attendant symbols. It is one of the central philosophical images in his own wide-ranging project. Variations on it appear throughout his corpus, but this essay will explore perhaps the most prominent variation, one by which Desmond explores the possibilities of re-awakening wonder in a purportedly disenchanting world and of thereby affirming the goodness of being. In the tradition of Plato, Desmond uses ascent out of the cave as a metaphor for this re-awakening. Desmond notes that, after Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, philosophy has often been more interested in descent, in digging down beneath the cave in search of a dark origin in will. Desmond argues, though, that such an origin cannot yield the light that even Schopenhauer's stark project requires. Nor does it provide a convincing justification for Nietzsche's "yes" to life. As an alternative way of conceptualizing descent, Desmond reconsiders another ancient "imaginative universal"—the descent into the underworld of Orpheus, Aeneas, and Christ. Drawing on this imaginative universal, Dante and Shakespeare depict kenotic descents that are also paradoxically ascents, descents that undo the fixations and self-delusions of the will and allow for a rebirth of compassion and wonder. Ultimately, the example of Dante suggests that a widespread reawakening of wonder might require renewed porosity between philosophy, art, and religion.

### ASTONISHMENT AND PERPLEXITY

At the heart of Desmond's project is a return to wonder as the departure point for philosophy.<sup>7</sup> For Desmond the most basic form of wonder is not determinate

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<sup>6</sup> In another essay on Desmond, O'Regan writes, "If the vision of the Good in the *Republic* is central, the symbols which provide the context in which the resistance of transcendent reality to language and concept is communicated reinforces the necessarily symbolic character of all truth, for example, symbols of ascent and descent, fire, sun, cave, prison, shadow etc. The historical Plato represents only an opening. What is required is a deeper and more extensive performance of the symbolic resources of philosophy that realizes its intimate relation to literature," "The Poetics of Ethos: William Desmond's Poetic Refiguration of Plato," *Ethical Perspectives*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2001), 292.

<sup>7</sup> On wonder, see Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 260-300.

curiosity about how things work. It is instead an astonishment at the sheer *thereness* of being, at the mystery of things existing at all. This sort of wonder, of course, is not peculiar to philosophers. It is a primordial human experience. For Desmond it is an agapeic astonishment. It is not grasping but receptive. It entails a heightened awareness, a heightened openness or “porosity,” a patience of being (*passio essendi*) more basic than a striving to be (*conatus essendi*).

The experience of beauty can be a part of such astonishment, and a sense of release in the experience of beauty has of course been a recurring theme of the aesthetic tradition. Still, Desmond’s astonishment is not disinterestedness. It can be ecstatic. In the case of astonishment before the beautiful, one is drawn out of oneself. There is an eros at work in the openness, an eros not opposed to agape but companioned by it. Furthermore, in astonishment we are attuned to how being is not inert or indeterminate but aesthetically hyperbolic and overdetermined. There is a “too muchness” to it. It is more than we can take in or determinately word. It is qualitatively rich, charged with equivocal value beyond its use value for us.<sup>8</sup> As Hopkins puts it in “God’s Grandeur,” “There lives the dearest freshness deep down things.”<sup>9</sup> Such agapeic astonishment is often accompanied by gratitude and reverence. It carries with it an affirmation of the goodness of being.

Desmond thinks this kind of astonishment suggests an agapeic origin to being itself, an agapeic God.<sup>10</sup> Dennis Vanden Auweele provides a useful gloss: “we find

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<sup>8</sup> See Desmond’s discussion of the hyperboles of being in *God and the Between* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 128-158. Some key works in eco-phenomenology are especially attuned to this qualitative richness. See, for instance, Erazim Kohák, *The Embers and the Stars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). In a different branch of phenomenology, there are interesting parallels between Desmond’s hyperboles and Jean-Luc Marion’s saturated phenomena. Cyril O’Regan discusses Desmond and the phenomenological tradition broadly, but also gives particular attention to parallels and differences between Desmond and Marion, in “Metaphysics and the Metaxological Space of Tradition,” *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, vol. 59, no. 3 (1997): 531-549.

<sup>9</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur” in *Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poetry and Prose*, ed. by K.E. Smith (Exeter: A. Wheaton & Co., 1976), 56.

<sup>10</sup> See Desmond’s *God and the Between* and *Is There a Sabbath for Thought? Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). This dimension of his thought has received extensive attention. See Richard Kearney, “Maybe Not, Maybe: William Desmond on God” in *Between System and Poetics*, 191-200; Christopher Ben Simpson, *Religion, Metaphysics, and the Postmodern: William Desmond and John D. Caputo* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009); Cyril O’Regan, “Naming God in *God and the Between*,” *Louvain Studies*, vol. 36 (2012): 282-301; Christopher Ben Simpson, “Theology, Philosophy, God and the Between,”

ourselves incapable of explaining an 'overfullness' on purely immanent terms, which refreshes our thought beyond its immanent self-insistence toward some enabling transcendence as other."<sup>11</sup> By agapeic origin Desmond means a "too muchness' of enabling power—enabling power as letting the good of particulars and communities realize itself in one fashion or another."<sup>12</sup> Desmond's agapeic origin endows a plurality of beings with their own integrity and worth but also in integral relation to one another. As we will see, Desmond contrasts such an agapeic origin with the erotic origin of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche as will (to power).<sup>13</sup> Desmond does not deny the imperatives of the will, but he sees these as subtended by an originating agapeic generosity that makes willing and self-transcendence possible as well as true service to the other. For Desmond we must receive an endowment of being before we strive to be, and to fixate only on striving for one's own sake is to risk a tyrannical will that not only runs roughshod over otherness but also cuts one off from sustaining reserves. The *conatus essendi* must be companioned by the *passio essendi*.

If this sounds too abstract, consider the sustaining reserves we access in sleep. For Desmond, sleep is a return to the porous *passio*. It is a primary example of how patience of being subtends striving to be. The striving can of course inflect sleep itself and cause nightmares. (Desmond points to *Macbeth*.<sup>14</sup>) But restorative sleep entails openness to what Desmond would call the agapeic energies of being. We might also consider the sun (especially given its resonance with Platonic myth) which spills capacitating energy onto the earth. Through an infinitely complex series of transformations and relations, this energy gives rise to the teeming

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*Radical Orthodoxy: Theology, Philosophy, Politics*, vol. 1, nos. 1-2 (2012): 262-279; Dennis Vanden Auweele, "Metaxological 'Yes' and Existential 'No': William Desmond and Atheism," *Sophia*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2013): 637-655; and the essays gathered in *William Desmond and Contemporary Theology*, ed. by Christopher Ben Simpson and Brendan Thomas Sammon (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Vanden Auweele, "Metaxological 'Yes' and Existential 'No,'" 644.

<sup>12</sup> Desmond, *The Intimate Universal: The Hidden Porosity Among Religion, Art, Philosophy, and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 420.

<sup>13</sup> For Schopenhauer, individuation is illusory representation—a magic lantern show put on by the will. In making the *passio essendi* more basic than the *conatus essendi*, Desmond positions himself against not only Schopenhauer and Nietzsche but also against their philosophical forefather Spinoza.

<sup>14</sup> On sleep and *Macbeth*, see Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought?*, 33-72.

biodiversity of Earth. Desmond writes that the sun “enables the between to be, it shines on the between, enabling the beings in it to be and grow and to know.”<sup>15</sup> The literal sun can be described as agapeic, and it is also an obvious symbol for an agapeic origin for being itself.<sup>16</sup> In general, Desmond’s terminology tends to be anchored in such experiences of the particular. He is a metaphysician with a phenomenological bent, one who remains close to embodied experience.<sup>17</sup> For Desmond philosophy itself requires a receptivity, a *passio* that lets being be and eventing happen before trying to give them determinate wording or systematic organization.

Crucially, Desmond does not simply oppose either the *passio* and the *conatus* or agape and eros. The first terms may be more basic, but they are intimately bound up with and help generate the latter. The *passio* is receptive, but it is not necessarily passive. Instead it is often experienced as a passion that seeds the *conatus*. We sleep (*passio*) and awake re-energized (*conatus*). While running one can catch a second wind where one’s self seems to dissipate—a companioning of *passio* and *conatus*. Likewise, as mentioned above, agapeic astonishment is itself seeded with eros. This eros can often lead to more determinate forms of wonder like perplexity and curiosity. There is a danger that this can in turn lead to a tyrannical eros or an instrumental mind that seeks to dominate otherness, but it can also give rise to Plato’s heavenly eros—a desire for the beautiful and the Good that draws us beyond our self. A beautiful landscape painting can render us still and silent before it, but astonishment can also seed a longing to be in such a place or a deeper longing for beauty as such.

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<sup>15</sup> Desmond, “Wording the Between” in *The William Desmond Reader*, ed. by Christopher Ben Simpson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 200.

<sup>16</sup> Desmond thinks there are hints of an agapeic origin in Plato, but he does not claim that Plato’s Good can be simply equated with the agapeic origin.

<sup>17</sup> This is also evident in his description of the human as an open, porous whole. This description has epistemological and ontological dimensions, but it is anchored in the body: “To breathe is to inhale and to exhale, to take in and to let loose, to incorporate and to free. Stop this rhythm of passing in and passing out, and death soon comes. If we are warm flesh, there is also a sweating, a porosity in the flesh itself. Close the pores, and the body overheats and closes down just through its own lack of access or openness to what is other to itself. We are in this breathing between all the time,” “Wording the Between,” 205. Our cells, our inner organs, our skin and sensory organs—all have their own integrity, but all are porous.

Yet if agapeic astonishment is primordial for Desmond, it is also easily lost. We are so intimately a part of being that we inevitably become inured to its strangeness. In our striving to be, we can recess our patience of being. This is a perennial human danger, but it has manifested in particular ways in modernity, where dominant technological and economic paradigms have created a widespread ethos of “serviceable disposability.” Wonder is consequently reduced to curiosity about how things work, which in turn easily becomes an instrumentalizing stance, a curiosity about how things might work *for us*. Desmond quotes Wordsworth: “We murder to dissect.”<sup>18</sup> Being is disenchanted in this ethos, its value reduced to mere use value.<sup>19</sup> Such critiques of course became central in twentieth century philosophy and social thought. We might think of Weber’s “iron cage,” Heidegger’s “enframing” and “standing reserve,” the “instrumental reason” critiqued by Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcel’s “technical man,” Voegelin’s modern “Gnosticism,” Ellul’s “technological society,” or Charles Taylor’s “buffered self.”

Desmond both draws on and contributes to this varied line of critique, but he cautions against describing the modern dominance of “serviceable disposability” as too complete. For Desmond humans can attempt to close off their openness. They can recess the *passio* and exaggerate the *conatus*. They can clog their porosity. A culture’s dominant ethos of being, like the modern ethos of serviceable disposability, can act like an anesthetic or a distorting lens. But humans never cease to be open wholes. Wonder can still strike us anew and strike us despite ourselves—through the starry sky or the brilliance of fall foliage, through the face of a new love or a newborn child, even through a close brush with death. These constant eruptions of wonder may be one reason why Desmond uses “ethos” and “clogged porosity” rather than more rigid metaphors that suggest total closure. (Furthermore, the ethos of modernity is complex. It is inflected by countervailing

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<sup>18</sup> William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” in *Selected Poems*, ed. by Stephen Gill (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004), 61.

<sup>19</sup> On “serviceable disposability,” see Desmond, *Ethics and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), 415-441. On the modern “ethos of being,” which conceives of being as valueless yet is haunted by the possibility that it is actually evil, see Desmond, “Ethics and the Evil of Being,” in *What Happened in and to Moral Philosophy in the Twentieth Century?: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Alasdair MacIntyre*, ed. by Fran O’Rourke (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 423-459.

elements. The dominance of serviceable disposability, for instance, has been challenged by an emergent ecological consciousness.) Still, Desmond does not discount the problems that accompany the ethos of serviceable disposability—from environmental destruction, to an exploitive commodification, to the loss of meaning and depth in life. Unexpected experiences of wonder can be restorative to the individual, but the dominant modern ethos of being makes it harder for them to be transformative, and especially transformative on the societal level. They can be easily dismissed as merely aesthetic or subjective rather than as instances of truer vision where reductive scales fall from our eyes.

There is another reason why we can easily lose our sense of astonishment. In the “between” of life we find not only hints of an agapeic origin but also strife and violence. Often they are overwhelming: wars, famines, epidemics, natural disasters. In the wake of world war and mass genocide, the twentieth century was haunted by the possibility that being was not neutral, as serviceable disposability assumes, but instead hostile or even evil. This is of course an ancient fear, one that can even spring up in the intimacy of beauty and catch us unawares. Consider Robert Frost’s unsettling sonnet “Design,” where the narrator is struck by a very different sort of wonder than agapeic astonishment when he discovers a white spider on a white flower feeding on a moth:

What had that flower to do with being white,  
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?  
What brought the kindred spider to that height,  
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?  
What but design of darkness to appall?—  
If design govern in a thing so small.<sup>20</sup>

There is a “chiaroscuro” of light and shadow in the between, and this can lead not to agapeic astonishment but to an anxious perplexity, even a horrified perplexity. This sort of wonder animates Frost’s poem, and Desmond acknowledges that it too is essential to philosophy.

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Frost, “Design,” in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, & Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirer and Mark Richardson (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 275.

## THE CAVE

A “chiaroscuro” also plays on the walls of Desmond’s cave of everyday experience. The perplexed philosopher could follow the Platonic path of ascent by looking to the light of the sun, by seeking to reaffirm the goodness of being without denying the realities of strife and violence.<sup>21</sup> But Desmond points out that “*different directionalities*” are possible within the cave: “We can move up, we can stay where we are, we can also move down.”<sup>22</sup> Desmond holds that many moderns have pursued the latter. They have burrowed down below the surface of the cave. They have sought an origin not in the light above but in the subterranean depths below—a dark origin. They “seem seized by the notion that our motion is not to come again to the surface of things but rather to descend below all surfaces where there is a truer darkness that the surface hides, even as the surface also shows some foreboding of it.”<sup>23</sup> Rather than seeking to reaffirm the goodness of being, the philosopher delves deeper into the horror of being, seeing this as the ultimate reality.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are key figures here.<sup>24</sup> Schopenhauer is a self-proclaimed follower of Plato, and Desmond finds the allegory of the cave particularly useful in sketching Schopenhauer’s project. He argues that Schopenhauer, before Nietzsche, offers an upside-down Platonism: “If we were to liken the world as representation to Plato’s Cave, could we liken Schopenhauer’s will to Plato’s Good? Quite the reverse. Will is no sun, but a dark original, darker even than the shadow land of representation. At first, it is more like a second underground, *beneath* the first underground as its origin, not above it as the Good.”<sup>25</sup> But we also need to double the image. There are two caves. We find ourselves in the cave of representation, and beneath it is the dark origin of the will,

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<sup>21</sup> For a suggestive “metaxological” approach to light, see Catherine Pickstock, “What Shines Between: The *Metaxu* of Light,” in *Between System and Poetics*, 107-122.

<sup>22</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being: On the Threshold between the Aesthetic and the Religious* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018), 69.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Desmond discusses Schopenhauer and Nietzsche throughout this work, but particularly relevant are the chapters on them in *Art, Origins, Otherness*, 131-208. See also the chapter on Schopenhauer in *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 164-195.

<sup>25</sup> Desmond, *Art, Origins, Otherness*, 131-132.

which is defined by blind “endless striving.”<sup>26</sup> Yet we are a cave of representation in our own right, and within us too are the subterranean depths of will, exerting profound but often disguised influence. (Freud, too, would go spelunking in this cave.)<sup>27</sup>

Schopenhauer agrees with Silenus that it would be better not to have been born, but he does not think we are absolutely captive to the dark origin. We can escape the rack of boredom and lack. Art can give us at least a temporary respite through the release into disinterested beauty. Ascetic religion or a sober philosophy can offer practices and knowledge that allow for a more lasting renunciation of the will. This renunciation can even give rise to compassion. But Desmond points to difficulties here. He wonders how “any reversal [is] possible if the will as described is the primal dark origin? For then even the reversal of the will is itself in the evil of being–will-lessness is itself will—and all that this entails. It is worse than Luther’s bondage of the will, for there is no way out. Release from our will would seem to meet in every direction the will again, and hence it would be no escape from the evil of being, only a new encounter with the universal horror.”<sup>28</sup> This tension is evident in the theological language that Schopenhauer draws on to describe the experience of will-lessness. He uses “grace” to help describe the transformation from will to will-lessness, and he talks of “bliss” in the release into the latter. He of course qualifies these terms. Schopenhauer insists that will-lessness is an experience of pure negation and criticizes even the Buddhist concept of *Nirvana* for obscuring this.<sup>29</sup> Yet the language of grace and bliss suggest positive experience, as does the compassion that Schopenhauer claims accompany them.

The tension is particularly pronounced in Schopenhauer’s account of beauty, which “can save us, if only episodically, from the devouring darkness of the will.

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<sup>26</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. by E.F.J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:164.

<sup>27</sup> Desmond agrees that the imagery of the cave needs to be doubled. We are in the cave, and we are also a cave ourselves, a cave with subterranean depths. It contains some of what Schopenhauer and Freud says it does, but it is also the inner abyss where the Platonic daimon dwells and where Augustine greets the divine. It is the inner abyss where the heavenly eros is seeded that leads us to ascend.

<sup>28</sup> Desmond, “Ethics and the Evil of Being,” 443–444.

<sup>29</sup> See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:359–412.

But how it can do so, is a good question.”<sup>30</sup> For Desmond the aesthetic has ontological bite. The experience of beauty is a primordial affirmation of being: “Schopenhauer is right in his description of the way beauty releases us but his explanation of this cannot account for this ontological pleasure. One might think here of music and the porosity—music and the flow of sounds, the secret history of the will, as Schopenhauer somewhere calls it: But why is this often so lovely, if the will is the horror he suggests it is?”<sup>31</sup> These possibilities for release suggest some light, some inherent goodness in being, but how can this be if the origin is inscrutably dark? Desmond wonders “whether at a certain limit some good ‘to be’ must be granted and we be released into its affirmation.”<sup>32</sup> He notes that agape does make a brief, suggestive appearance in *The World as Will and Representation*,<sup>33</sup> but Schopenhauer never develops it into his broad account of our predicament.

Nietzsche, the vituperative critic of Plato and prodigal student of Schopenhauer, delves below the cave as well. Desmond notes that in the opening line of *Daybreak*, Nietzsche describes himself as a “subterranean man,” “one who tunnels and mines and undermines.”<sup>34</sup> His is a dark erotic origin as well, a voracious will (to power). Where Schopenhauer says no, though, Nietzsche wants to say an ecstatic yes. Yet Desmond writes, “We are still below the ground of the cave when Nietzsche tries to reverse the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ of Schopenhauer. The basic description of life persists. We live in foreboding of the Medusa below the surface—the horror that turns us to stone.”<sup>35</sup> Art has an important role for Nietzsche vis-à-vis the dark origin as well. In his early writings he offers an “aesthetic theodicy.” In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Apollonian art shields us from the terrifying truth of the origin. Dionysian art intoxicates us on its energies and allows us to say a more vital yes. The metaphor of intoxication is suggestive, though. If you drink too deeply, you might poison yourself. A fuller reckoning with the origin would be fatal.

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<sup>30</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 71.

<sup>31</sup> Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 309.

<sup>32</sup> Desmond, “Ethics and the Evil of Being,” 444.

<sup>33</sup> See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:375-376.

<sup>34</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. by R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>35</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 85.

There are many turns in Nietzsche's body of work, and he is a self-professed wearer of masks. He tries to distance himself more decisively from Schopenhauer in his later writings. In *Human, All Too Human* he attempts to move past the metaphysics of appearance and reality (with their vestiges of Schopenhauer's "representation" and "will"). Desmond argues, though, that the break with Schopenhauer is never complete and that the dark origin remains in Nietzsche's project. He points to an aesthetic theodicy re-emerging in Nietzsche's later writings. *Twilight of the Idols* revisits some of the themes of *The Birth of Tragedy*. There are echoes of Schopenhauer's claim that "eternal becoming, endless flux, belong to the revelation of the essential nature of the will"<sup>36</sup> when Nietzsche calls the Dionysian "an excess of force"<sup>37</sup> in *Twilight of the Idols* or when, in the writings posthumously collected as *Will to Power*, he calls the world "a monster of energy, without beginning, without end; a firm, iron magnitude of force that does not grow bigger or smaller, that does not expend itself but only transforms itself [...]"<sup>38</sup> Throughout his later works Nietzsche attempts to "sing the world beyond good and evil, in all its joy and monstrousness, its rapture and suffering," to embrace the innocence of becoming.<sup>39</sup> Desmond shares Nietzsche's desire to say "yes," but he wonders if Nietzsche finds a persuasive way to the yes:

Nietzsche, properly interpreted, and this means sometimes interpreted against himself, is on the right track in asking about the ultimate amen; but he is betrayed by the whole horizon of his thinking. What is this horizon? I note four major aspects: First, it is defined by the view of valueless being, worse, by being as pain, even horror, at bottom. Second, by a view of the protective, recuperative power of creative will to power as affirming, *despite* worthlessness and horror. I call this whistling in the dark. Third, by a totalizing claim with respect to will to power (*all being* is will to power [...]). But this totalized claim cannot sustain in full the sought affirmation. A different consent to otherness is needed—beyond the will to power that either dominates the other or wills its own will. We need an agapaic origination and self-

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<sup>36</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:164.

<sup>37</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1982), §4, 560.

<sup>38</sup> Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), §1067, 550.

<sup>39</sup> Desmond, *God and the Between*, 27.

transcendence. Fourth, by the fact that our affirming will to power collapses in view of the totalized will to power: if all being is valueless, we too are valueless finally, in the valueless whole, and all our brave, heroic valuing is swallowed by the valueless whole. Inference: for the Nietzschean affirmation to make any sense at all, there must be some *inherent hospitality* of being to good."<sup>40</sup>

Desmond notes that in his accounts of festive affirmation Nietzsche can sound more agapeic notes, and that Nietzsche is attuned to positive possibilities of selving that Schopenhauer denies.<sup>41</sup> Again, Desmond wonders if the dark origin can ultimately provide even the spare light needed by the spelunkers.

Nietzsche, of course, wants to stay true to the earth. Even when he delves beneath the ground, he aims to return to "daybreak." Desmond responds, with the Platonic myth in mind, that the surface of the earth is lit by the sun. And while life often has storms and clouds—the chiaroscuro of light and shadow—the shadows themselves necessitate a source of light. The Platonic legacy is often accused (and perhaps most vociferously by Nietzscheans) of metaphysical escapism. Platonists want to leave the surface behind, to ascend from the phenomenal to the noumenal. The theory of the Forms denigrates the material world and especially the body. Historically, some strands of Platonism have tended in this direction. (Desmond is undoubtedly more affirmative of the body than ancient Platonists.) Still, he thinks that Platonism is often caricatured. Matter may be ontologically deficient for Platonists, but when given form it is shot through with the overflowing excess of beauty and the Good.<sup>42</sup> Consider Platonic and Neoplatonic accounts of beauty,

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 27-28. Furthermore, if there is a primal goodness of being, then one cannot reach the innocence of becoming by going absolutely beyond "good and evil." One would end up not just sloughing off convention but also betraying the primal good upon which we depend. Again, Macbeth is illustrative. He tries to go beyond good and evil but ends up murdering sleep—the primal goodness of the *passio*. There is no longer a trustful repose for him. The true innocence of becoming is not will-to-power but a companioning of *passio* and *conatus*, with the former being fundamental.

<sup>41</sup> In "Metaxological 'Yes' and Existential 'No,'" Vanden Auweele puts pressure on Desmond's reading of Nietzsche on this point of selving. He argues that Nietzsche recognizes the excessive origin, but does not affirm it. Nietzsche's existential "no" is an atheism in the name of autonomy. Vanden Auweele is a sensitive and sympathetic reader of both Desmond and Nietzsche.

<sup>42</sup> Douglas Hedley explains, "The material realm, for the Neoplatonist, is—though subject to decay—not alien to the soul because it is produced by the non-deliberative intelligence of the World-soul. The apparently inanimate exhibits intelligence. Our planet, and indeed the entire physical universe, is a dynamic and harmonious unity that mirrors the unity of the noetic

in which all forms shimmer or radiate: “The *eidōs* shines on the surface of things to the looking that is mindful of the ‘look.’”<sup>43</sup> Desmond is concerned with the ancient philosophical task of “saving the appearances.” He has debts to the Platonic legacy, but he also has a phenomenologist’s close concern with happening. He, like Nietzsche, wants to stay true to the earth, to sing its song, and to say “yes.” He would ask, though, whether the dark origin of a Schopenhauer or a Nietzsche can ultimately do justice to how being manifests, most strikingly in agapeic astonishment but also in patient mindful attentiveness, as a community of singular beings charged with qualitative value. Another return to the cave will illustrate this:

Restoring what it means to stand on the earth and resurrect the surface of things puts one in mind, paradoxically, of the Platonic analogy of the cave. We live underground, and when freed we undertake a painful and blinding ascent to the surface of the earth, there to be able to behold a light only equivocally present under the surface. Platonic ascent is often now said to be treasonous to the surface of the earth, but we could read this ascent differently. Is it not the sun that enables the earth to be the dynamic, becoming, intelligible, indeed worthy and good reality it is? Without it not only the underground, but also the surface would be plunged into darkness. To live in the light of the sun we need to be on the surface and behold the shine on things.<sup>44</sup>

This ascent does not involve leaving the world behind as much as re-awakening to it, seeing it anew and more truly, seeing its goodness.

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cosmos. [...] Nature is a harmonious unity because it is an image or expression of the divine mind. It is weaker and less valuable than the Intellect, but nevertheless possesses its own derivative goodness—which Plotinus defends vigorously against the Gnostics.” *Living Forms of the Imagination*, 22. See also Stephen R.L. Clark, *Plotinus: Myth, Metaphor, and Philosophical Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), a work that challenges the view that Plotinus was as hostile toward the body as Porphyry claimed in his biography.

<sup>43</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 68. Desmond also points to the *Timaeus*, where “the Demiurge is motivated to create out of a desire to make the world the *most beautiful and good possible*,” *Art, Origins, Otherness*, 220. One could also point to the Christian Neoplatonism descending from Dionysius the Areopagite to figures such as John Scotus Eriugena and the Victorines that proclaims the world a theophany. On Desmond’s relationship to this tradition, see Simpson, “Theology, Philosophy, God and the Between.” It would also be interesting to bring Desmond’s recent writings on beauty, life, and creation into conversation with Hildegard of Bingen’s concept of “viridity.”

<sup>44</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 68.

If we return to Desmond's diagnosis of modernity, being is often seen as inert, as having no value beyond its use value, its "serviceable disposability." (Desmond does not make much of the shadow-casters in the cave, but that element of Plato's allegory seems useful here—our "ethos of being" is shaped by advertisements, consumerism, education, technological mediation.<sup>45</sup>) We are struck by wonder, and we see things anew—the same things we have been viewing all along but through distortions. We may not literally ascend, but Desmond would claim that a mindful attention to the phenomena themselves, their mysterious *thereness* and aesthetic overdeterminancy, does raise the question of the origin. There is transcendence in staying true to the surface.

Yet in Plato's allegory there is also the return to the cave. How can the "ethos of serviceable disposability" be ruptured, a sense of value beyond use value restored? Desmond affirms that the philosopher must return to the cave, but the likelihood of the philosopher's success in awakening those still entranced is another matter. There is also a second sense in which we are bound to return to the cave. For Desmond, the equivocal chiaroscuro is never fully dissipated. It is constitutive of the human condition. What the ascent secures is not determinate knowledge so much as a renewed attunement to the agapeic dimensions of being, a renewed sense of the goodness of the "to be."

Heidegger argues that Plato's allegory of the cave both affirms the Greek conception of truth as disclosure (*aletheia*) and also introduces a conception of truth as correspondence. The latter ultimately comes to dominate the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>46</sup> Desmond challenges Heidegger's reading of both Plato and the wider tradition, but he agrees that a reductive ascent is possible, a reductive desire for truth that would reduce wonder to curiosity, that would treat the chiaroscuro as a problem rather than a mystery (to borrow terms from Gabriel Marcel). The aesthetic hyperbole, for instance, would become a problem of optics shorn of ontological significance and a sense of overdetermined worth. As Desmond explains, "Some searches for the Sun are resolved to turn the Cave

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<sup>45</sup> See Paul Tyson's suggestive re-imagining of the cave in light of contemporary artificers in "The Politics of the Metaphysical Imagination. Critiquing Transnational Corporate Power via Plato's Cave." *Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary*, vol. 1, no. 6 (2015): 151-170.

<sup>46</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth: On Plato's Cave Allegory and Theaetetus*, trans. by Ted Sadler (London: Continuum, 2009).

entirely into a glare of garish light: scientific enlightenment. What is produced? A different darkness.”<sup>47</sup> This is not the sort of ascent he counsels: “Other searches for the Sun come more deeply to grant the truth of the Cave, the equivocal truth that will always be our lot as finite beings.”<sup>48</sup>

## THE UNDERWORLD

Desmond’s critique of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is hardly a dismissal.<sup>49</sup> They are themselves great poetic philosophers, in large part because of their attunement to the excessiveness of being. They are also attuned to wonder in a way that many moderns are not. In *The World as Will and Representation*, Schopenhauer writes, “No beings, with the exception of man, feel surprised at their own existence [...] And [man’s] wonder is the more serious, as here for the first time it stands consciously face to face with *death*, and besides the finiteness of all existence, the vanity and fruitlessness of all effort force themselves on it more or less. Therefore with this reflection and astonishment arises the *need for metaphysics* that is peculiar to man alone; accordingly, he is an *animal metaphysicum*.”<sup>50</sup> This is not the wonder of agapeic astonishment, of course. It is the wonder of a darker perplexity, one stirred by death, destruction, and disappearance. This wonder is essential to philosophy too, and it is an unavoidable experience in life. We are struck by it just as we are struck by astonishment. In the ethos of serviceable disposability, such perplexity can be manipulated for economic or political ends, but these manipulations rarely involve a full confrontation with the questions of ultimacy that perplexity raises (since such questions might unsettle the ethos itself). Yet these questions haunt modernity. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are among those who raise them directly and who confront the sufferings and horrors of life. And

<sup>47</sup> Desmond, *Is There a Sabbath for Thought?*, 277.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> In his introduction to the *William Desmond Reader*, Christopher Ben Simpson notes some of Desmond’s affinities with Nietzsche: “From Nietzsche [Desmond] gleans the recognition of becoming and the equivocal; the yea-saying, affirmative, Dionysian celebration of the finite and the earth; the critique of rational reductionisms, the nihilism of our merely human valuations; the poetic mode of philosophy (like Plato),” xiv.

<sup>50</sup> Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, 2:160.

while they may be hyperbolic, they are undoubtedly alert diagnosticians of self-delusion and hypocrisy.

In light of unavoidable perplexity, Desmond launches a second foray: Is there another form of descent that is also paradoxically an ascent? Perplexity can be simply debilitating. It can lead to crippling despair. Both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in their different ways want to provide us with a shield against this Medusa's head. Desmond points out that there are multiple possibilities for ascent and descent: "There are ways of going up that cast one down: hubris and downfall. There are ways of going down that lead up: redemptive passage through Hell—see Dante conducted by Virgil. There are ways of going up that do go up, ways of going down that go deeper down and don't come up."<sup>51</sup> For Desmond perplexity is not necessarily opposed to agapeic astonishment. Perplexity often emerges out of astonishment, as one returns with new awareness to the equivocal chiaroscuro of existence. And astonishment can in turn emerge out of a perplexity that acts as "a kind of purgatory."<sup>52</sup> In this sort of perplexity we might find ourselves carried down into dark depths, but the harrowing descent undoes our self-delusions and our fixations. Our *conatus* is humbled, and we are harshly returned to the *passio*, to a cracked open porosity. As Desmond puts it, we become as nothing. Yet this new porosity can open us to more than rending forces. We can also be reborn into a purified awareness of otherness, a new agapeic astonishment. This is akin to what Desmond calls "posthumous mindfulness": "Suppose we were to think from out of the future when we will be dead, about what is worthy of affirmation here and now [...] What would one love to behold again, behold with a kind of love? What would one mourn to see utterly destroyed? What are the nameless things we now love which we would delight to greet again?"<sup>53</sup> Desmond recommends that we cultivate such mindfulness as a practice, but in purgatorial perplexity an analogous

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<sup>51</sup> Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 310.

<sup>52</sup> Desmond, *The Intimate Strangeness of Being*, 296.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 294. Desmond's "posthumous mind" echoes ancient spiritual practices in interesting ways, but for this essay's purposes, it especially invites comparison with Nietzsche's "eternal return." They are different in that Nietzsche's infinite repetition can feel like a curse, "the greatest weight," but they are similar in that they can also occasion affirmation. In *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche posits a demon that comes and tells you of the eternal return. You may "gnash your teeth," but there is another possibility: "Or did you once experience a tremendous moment when you would have answered him, 'You are a god, and never have I heard anything more godly,'" *The Portable Nietzsche*, 273-274.

(though harrowing) experience is unwillingly undergone. Perplexity can strip us of our pretensions and allows us to see anew, as if reawakened or reborn.

Desmond turns to two literary exemplars to explore this possibility. Consider Lear on the heath. He has been stripped of his power and humiliated. He is exposed to an unrelenting storm. Here at his nadir Lear is utterly perplexed, but there is a remarkable agapeic rebirth out of his perplexity. He finds himself overwhelmed with compassion:

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness defend  
you  
From seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, pomp.  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou may'st shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just. (III.4.32-41)<sup>54</sup>

Obviously Lear's sufferings (and anger) are not over yet, but this rebirth on the heath arguably allows him to truly see and love Cordelia at the end of the play—to love her in her singularity, agapeically, and not for how she can indulge his willful aims (as in Act I). Importantly, this renewed love for Cordelia carries with it a renewed wonder for goods the earlier Lear would have likely brushed away. When Lear and Cordelia are captured, he takes consolation in an imagined life together of simple pleasures: “So we'll live,/And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh/At gilded butterflies [...]” (V.3.12-14). Indeed, Lear's reawakening is part of what makes Cordelia's loss so unbearable at the end of the play.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>54</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (New York: Folger Shakespeare Library/Simon and Schuster, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Schopenhauer explores a similar dynamic. Most people will not achieve will-lessness through voluntary asceticism. “Therefore in most cases,” he claims, “the will must be broken by the greatest personal suffering before its self-denial appears. We then see the man suddenly retire into himself, after he is brought to the verge of despair through all the stages of increasing affliction with the most violent resistance. We see him know himself and the world, change his whole nature, rise above himself and above all suffering, as if purified and sanctified by it, in inviolable peace, bliss, and sublimity [...],” *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:392. Schopenhauer and Desmond seem to describe the same phenomenon, but they read its implications differently. Both emphasize an undoing of the *conatus*, but the result for Desmond

Desmond sees in the story of Lear the echo of another ancient imaginative universal, one with affinities to Plato's allegory—the descent into the underworld. With Lear “we are under the underground, below Plato's cave, where the light above earth does not penetrate. And yet deep down under, the intimacy is not avoided, for we are it, we are in it, and to be so is always to be companioned. The divine is there in the bowels of hell. Jesus harrows hell. Dionysus is also Hades. Orpheus sings in the underworld and the dead and the lords of the dead are moved.”<sup>56</sup> There can be traces of the agapeic even in the underworld. *King Lear* is set in pagan times, but the Christian allusions in Lear's speech on the heath are overt. In Christianity salvation lies through the Cross and Christ's descent into hell. Descent can be a sanctifying *kenosis*, and suffering that draws us closer to Christ can also issue in Christ-like compassion.

Dante's is the greatest literary descent into the underworld. At the beginning of the *Inferno*, Dante is perplexed in the dark wood of error. He tries to take the direct path of ascent, but this is closed off by the monsters of vice. The shade of Virgil arrives to guide him, but the path to paradise leads down through hell. In the descent, Dante encounters manifold possibilities of self-delusion, vanity, and viciousness literalized in the punishment of sinners. “In general,” as William Franke points out, “the punishment simply makes explicit and permanent the life-choice that is elected in committing the sin.”<sup>57</sup> Consider, apropos of Desmond's concern with affirmation, Dante's encounter with “the sullen” in Canto VII. They are trapped beneath slime, so Virgil must rehearse their speech for them:

“Sullen were we in the air made sweet by the Sun;  
In the glory of his shining our hearts poured  
a bitter smoke. Sullen were we begun;

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is a renewed astonishment at the world and at beings in their singular worth. Desmond also discerns a renewed sense of the elemental kinship with being in such experience, but for Schopenhauer the result is a far more radical deindividuation. The secret obscured by representation is uncovered: “evil and wickedness, suffering and hatred, the tormented and the tormentor, different as they may appear to knowledge that follows the principle of sufficient reason, are in themselves one, phenomenon of the one will-to-live that objectifies its conflict with itself by means of the *principium individuationis*,” *The World as Will and Representation*, 1:394.

<sup>56</sup> Desmond, *The Intimate Universal*, 69.

<sup>57</sup> William Franke, *The Revelation of Imagination: From Homer and the Bible through Virgil and Augustine to Dante* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 323.

sullen we lie forever in this ditch.  
 This litany they gargle in their throats  
 as if they sang, but lacked the words and pitch.”  
 (vii. 121-126)<sup>58</sup>

Note here that the sin is in part a betrayal of the given, which entails a scorning of the “Sun” and the “shining” as gifts of God. Each encounter is an opportunity for searching reflection or even self-chastening on Dante’s part. Kathleen Raine notes, “His journey follows a descending course through ever-narrowing circles, each representing some of the sins that deform the soul; and there, in each of the states, the poet is moved, now with pity, now with horror, to find persons he had known on earth. But each successive hell is at the same time a recognition of what lies within himself.”<sup>59</sup>

Dante’s descent is kenotic. By the time he reaches the center of hell his own delusions are undone, his own porosity cleansed. This stands in marked contrast with the Satan that he encounters there. Desmond explains that “the frozen Lucifer is beyond all porosity, all permeability: fixed eternally in himself as himself—a parody of divine eternity.”<sup>60</sup> Virgil and Dante climb down Satan’s limbs and pass through a hole. Suddenly down has become up, a startling reminder to both Dante and the reader of the paradox of his journey. Now they climb quickly and emerge beneath the stars:

He first, I second, without thought of rest  
 we climbed the dark until we reached the point  
 where a round opening brought in sight the blest  
  
 and beauteous shining of the Heavenly cars.  
 And we walked out once more beneath the Stars.  
 (xxxiv. 139-143)

The imagery suggests a rebirth for Dante, and the closing lines suggest a rebirth of astonished wonder at the “blest/and beauteous” stars. Guided by Virgil in his poem, Dante in turn acts as a guide for his readers as we join him on an inner journey that begins in and deepens *our* perplexity as we all as Dante’s. It is a

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<sup>58</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. by John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1982).

<sup>59</sup> Kathleen Raine, “The Inner Journey of the Poet” in Raine, *That Wondrous Pattern: Essays on Poetry and Poets*, ed. by Brian Keeble (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2017), 99.

<sup>60</sup> Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being*, 97.

journey that feels like descent but is ultimately an ascent. We ascend out of the cave, and see the surface anew. If the journey begins in perplexity, it ends in renewed agapeic astonishment. "To come thus to the surface of things, after hell," writes Desmond, "we begin again to open to the marvel of things. We even begin to wonder if the saturated surface of things is the place of consecration where God gives himself for praise."<sup>61</sup>

Desmond's reflections on Dante suggest how the modern ethos of serviceable disposability may be challenged. The philosopher returning to the cave may not be strong enough alone, but a renewed porosity between philosophy, art, and religion may be.<sup>62</sup> Obviously, there are marked differences between the theist Desmond and the atheists Schopenhauer and Nietzsche in this regard, but not absolute differences. Nietzsche, as a late Romantic, is preoccupied with the possibility of revivifying myth, with the possibility of art and philosophy pursuing this together. (Think of Wagner and Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*.) He is a key figure in the modern quest to find a substitute for religion in art. Crucially, though, he does not mean a modern conception of art. He excoriates "art for art's sake" in *Twilight of the Idols*. He means a primal art of myth and festive ritual, one in which we participate rather than simply observe. While they conceive of the festive differently, Nietzsche and Desmond both give it a preeminent place in their philosophy, and both associate it with affirmation. Desmond is closer to Schopenhauer, though, in bringing art, religion, and philosophy into relation. For Schopenhauer they are three means of gaining release from the will. Hegel also brings the three into relation, of course, but in at least one crucial way Desmond is closer to Schopenhauer than Hegel, since the latter obscures the mystery of being and focuses on the determinable while Schopenhauer is a philosopher of perplexity. Desmond sees art, religion, and philosophy as stewards of the mystery of being, as stewards of not just perplexity, but of astonishment as well. Art, religion, and philosophy can all betray that role, but together they offer some hope of rupturing the ethos of serviceable disposability.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>62</sup> This is a major theme of Desmond's that spans his body of work. See especially *Art, Origins, Otherness*, 265-294.