

Calls from Beyond: Transcendence in Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*

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Abstract: Anthony Doerr's novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*, is rife with overdetermined Otherness, what William Desmond describes in *Arts, Origins, and Otherness* as a "third sense of transcendence" (268). This Otherness evokes wonder from the characters and motivates their decisions. The experience of Otherness through reading is also thematized through Marie-laure LeBlanc. Ultimately, the novel returns the reader to the mystery of how art works. Building on Desmond's ideas, I propose that a Second Reader exists in the process of the creation of imaginative worlds—a Transcendent Reader.

Keywords: Third Transcendence, William Desmond, The Second Reader, Otherness and Reading

In *Arts, Origins, and Otherness*, William Desmond claims that the burden of transcendence has been placed on the artist, the subject who experiences the art, and the art itself (266).¹ Desmond believes, however, that the power that art occasions is beyond the subject *and* the work of art. He attributes this categorial error partly to the uneasiness that philosophy has with "Origin," which is always outside of one's definitive understanding (8, 9). He often compares it to the sunlight outside of Plato's cave. Origin, though unfashionable in philosophical, and certainly literary, circles, is an abiding Other at work in the experience of art, for what occasions one's experience with art—whether music, literary works, or the plastic arts—is impossible to understand in any definitive sense. Desmond defines this beyond by proposing three forms of the otherness of transcendence and equating it with the third: the other in physical form, whether the material world or other people, the other as self-determining transcendence, wherein the self conceptualizes its own otherness to itself, (*Art, Origins* 268), and a transcendence beyond both the physical and interior other. For Desmond this third sense is "other to these [first] two senses" (*Arts, Origins* 269):

[This is] transcendence itself, not as exterior, not as the interior, but as the superior. Transcendence itself would be in excess of determinate beings, as their original ground; it would be beyond self-transcendence as its most ultimate possibilizing source. It would be beyond the ordinary doublet of possibility/reality, as their possibilizing source. It could not be just a possibility, not indeed a determinate realization of possibility. It would have to be active possibilizing power, in a manner more original and other than possibility and realization...In excess of determinacy and our self-determining, it would be overdetermined transcendence which, as other, would not be a merely indefinite beyond to finite being. (*Art, Origins* 269)

In other words, for Desmond, this Other is not defined by its relationship to finitude or the other senses of transcendence. It is not determinate and not "thinkable" (*Being and the Between* 254). It is "pointed beyond objectness and subjectness to transobjective and transsubjective transcendence" (*Art, Origins*, 269). Despite our inability to discuss it comprehensively, it is the force at the source of metaphysics, religion, and our experience of art, whether as creators or beholders. Desmond calls one's response to this sense of Otherness "agapeic astonishment" and believes it "is like 'beholding from'—the Other-being comes toward us, and we are called beyond ourselves" (*Being and the Between* 9).²

It is this sense of wonder (another word Desmond uses to describe this astonishment)—being called beyond ourselves by the third transcendence—that I want to explore through Anthony Doerr's Pulitzer-Prize winning novel, *All the Light We Cannot See*. The novel follows the lives of two young characters, Werner Pfennig and Marie-Laure LeBlanc, and others, throughout the rise of Nazi Germany and the German occupation of France. Werner, an orphan who lives with his sister, Jutta, is a curious young man who tinkers with radios. Eventually, after a German soldier discovers his abilities, he is sent to a training camp where he is enlisted in the German military. Marie-Laure is a French girl who goes blind at a young age. She must learn to navigate the world through feeling of models and practicing steps throughout the city. When news arrives that the Germans are invading France, she and her father escape to Saint-Malo where she must learn, again, the cityscape. Marie-Laure eventually finds herself alone in Saint-Malo, her father sent to a concentration camp and her uncle Etienne arrested by German soldiers for transmitting messages to the allies. The narrative shifts between the two characters, and others, until Werner arrives in Saint-Malo and eventually saves Marie-Laure from Sergeant Von Rempel of the Third Reich. Within the complex netting of the story, one can see Desmond's idea of the third transcendence at work in three ways: as the characters experience it, as it relates to the experience of the reader, for whom Marie-Laure serves as a representation, and as it appears in poetic conceits.

Music and the Third Sense of Transcendence

Music³ is most often the way that the third transcendence is attenuated in the novel, especially in Werner's sections. Debussy's "Clare de Lune," in conjunction with the scientific broadcast, helps awaken Werner to wonder. As a child, he hears a "a piano [come] on, playing a lonely song that sounds . . . like a golden boat traveling a dark river. . . [The] houses turned to mist, the mines filled in, the smokestacks fallen, an ancient sea spilling through the streets, and the air streaming with possibility" (Doerr 49). Music transforms the glum of Zollverein to an antediluvian milieu in which the water lays waste to the mines with an ancient sea.⁴ Werner's openness to imagine such things, to be rapt with such a picture, despite living in an orphanage, in a wasteland city, points to an otherness beyond material reality. Likewise, the reader has no reason to believe that Werner's own self-determining effects this response to the music. The wonder comes to him from outside and is juxtaposed to his own experience and perception of the world; something grips him from beyond.

The novel's power hinges on these early moments of wonder, for it is youthful astonishment that surfaces at the end of the novel and leads Werner to act against his allegiance to Nazi Germany. After using his gifts with technology to aid the Germans' missions to assassinate villagers who are communicating with Allies, and finding himself trapped in rubble from the Ally's bombs, Werner again hears the radio program, now broadcast by Marie-Laure. He hears "Claire de Lune⁵" and the familiar scientist's voice, and it is as if Werner has been once again hoisted atop the "golden boat" he imagined as a child in Zollverein (Doerr 49). He feels the "little shell in which he and Volkheimer sit . . . [going] electric," and when he hears "the harmonies like steadily thickening pearls on a strand. . .," he "sees six-year-old Jutta lean toward him, Frau Elena kneading bread in the background, a crystal radio in his lap, the cords of his soul not yet severed" (407). It is not simply innocence on which he ponders; it is not simply an easier time. Upon adult reflection, he calls those times as the times before the "cords of his soul" were severed (407).

Because Werner is materially engaged with the sensibilities of Nazi Germany, one should not, of course, sympathize with him. But, his experiences with the third transcendence enable the reader to see him, and even his most brutish colleague, Volkheimer, as *more than* Nazis. At the end of the novel, Volkheimer experiences a kind of rapture when, trapped in the building, running out of food and water, he hears the static of a transmission "impossibly . . . [coalesce] into music" (454):

Volkheimer's eyes open as wide as they can. Straining the blackness for every stray photon. A single piano runs up scales. Then back down. He listens to the notes and the silences between them, and then

finds himself leading horses through a forest at dawn, trudging through snow behind his great-grandfather, who walks with a saw draped over his huge shoulders, the snow squeaking beneath boots and hooves, all the trees above them whispering and creaking. They reach the edge of a frozen pond, where a pine grows as tall as a cathedral. His great-grandfather goes to his knees like a penitent, fits the saw into a groove in the bark, and begins to cut. (454)

As the music plays, though Volkheimer is in darkness, he seeks “ever stray photon.” But, the light he cannot see arises from his experience of the music. It is the music that transports him there, the same music that awakened wonder in Werner. The analogies imbue nature with religious significance. Volkheimer’s experience with his grandfather is also an essentially human one though neither he nor his grandfather speaks. Because of the music, he is reminded of wonderment (the pine as tall as a cathedral) and the smallness of human understanding (his grandfather as a penitent). After Volkheimer’s experience of the song, he throws a “grenade at the place where the stairwell used to be,” something he refused to do earlier because he felt it too dangerous (455).

Does the recollection suggest to him that humans can effect important changes (as his grandfather sacrificed his strength for what we assume must be the warmth that the firewood will provide)? Or, is Volkheimer simply reminded of being a child, astounded by the world, where trees whisper and stand like cathedrals? The reader knows that whatever he experiences speaks to him of the elusive “Goodness.” And, within the symmetry of the novel, this “Goodness” is carried out through his sacrifice for the girl on the “wrong” side, like many of the innocents he has killed before. It is a profound change and cannot be overstated, for everything that happens afterwards, his surrender, and, years later, visiting Jutta (Werner’s sister) to return Werner’s belongings all arise within the narrative from this moment.⁶

Although trapped in the rubble, when Werner hears the broadcast, it is like a “memory coming at [him] like a six-car train out of the darkness, the chords rising peacefully, each a candle leading deeper into a forest” (406). The passage finishes with a hand fetching “him up for air” after feeling he has been drowning (406). The metaphors pile upon each other: a six-car train, the chords of the memory, and candles leading into a forest. Then, something hefts him out of water. The unnamed “somebody” who fetches him is perhaps the most direct reference to a wholly Other transcendence. That it fetches him suggests that it appears from a place outside of his own mind. This transcendence, appropriately, is represented by fragmentary and elliptical analogies: train, candle, and hand. Each one is wholly insufficient to represent the whole of the experience, instead simply pointing to the experience. The reader knows that the “fetching” pulls Werner back into wonder, and this wonder, within the novel, honors the otherness of light within human existence, for it leads him to saving Marie-Laure.

Frederick and the Third Transcendence

A strange otherness grips Frederick as well. When, close to the end, the narrative moves back to Frederick, who has made no improvements since his traumatic brain injury, the reader is placed in darkness but invited to see, or feel, beyond it. While Frederick and his mother are in the garden, an owl appears. The scene harkens back to Frederick’s love of birds in childhood. It was his sensitive side, and perhaps even feminine qualities, that estranged him from the rest of his comrades. And, in Frederick’s predicament we sense great tragedy. The moment with the owl, however, invokes the power of something Other. Contrasts in moods abound. Frederick “sits up straight” and “stares and stares” when he sees the owl (Doerr 523). However, the owl flies away, and “the darkness swallows it” (523). Frederick gazes “toward the shadows,” and his mother asks him if he has seen it (523). His response to the owl is uncanny. His body “becomes rigid” and “[veins] stand out in his neck.” He asks his mother, “What are we doing...?” and she responds, “We’re just sitting and looking out at the night” (523). The oppositions here evade determinate interpretation. Frederick serves as a great example of Desmond’s idea about what occurs in the grip of the third transcendence: “An excess of

other-being overflows toward one. This is astonishing, not because initially we can make sense of it, but simply because mind opens up agapeically before it. It is there, and in a sense, it is too much" (*Being and the Between* 11). Steven E. Knepper, in summarizing Desmond's ideas, writes, "The epiphanic encounter is another experience of wonder. Sometimes wonder-as-astonishment marks the epiphany, at other times wonder-as-perplexity, at yet other times there is something of both" (131). In this scene, which is a kind of oblique epiphany, the reader can see both. Because Frederick does not have the capacity to render what occurs intellectually, asking only what they are doing, he is perhaps the most apt representation of the experience of the Other. His reaction is visceral, his body becoming rigid and his eyes widening. The reader knows only that the animal is a visitor channeling his childhood love of birds and that his body reacts with excitement. But that is all. Frederick's question "What are we doing?" is the perfect ending to the scene, for it speaks to the overdeterminate nature of third transcendence (Doerr 523). Even though the bird's appearance grips Frederick, he cannot make determinate sense of it.

Marie-Laure, Third Transcendence, Reader, and Second (Superior) Reader

Like the characters experience the third transcendence, so, too, does the reader—perhaps any reader of any fiction—a reality mirrored quite fascinatingly in Marie-Laure's quest to understand the world. Her understanding of material reality is limited because of her blindness. At first, she fumbles to conceptualize the material world: "Spaces she once knew as familiar...have become labyrinths bristling with hazards." (27). So, too, the reader of the novel begins the *diegesis* in darkness, fumbling her way through the narrative with only the signposts of language to guide the way. The structure of the narrative also lends to this sense of disorientation, fragmented by several third-person narrative points of view: of Marie-Laure and Werner, Sergeant Von Rompel, and, likewise, several places before, during, and decades after the occupation. The reader must work to navigate the changing points of view, the changing landscape *and* the time shifts much like Marie-Laure works to learn the contours of her house and the city around.

One reason that the reader can navigate the changing points of view and places is because Doerr has focused so much of his attention on the physical world. In fact, in his essay, "Touching Literature," Irving Goh, when discussing the opening page that depicts Ally planes dropping warnings to the inhabitants of Saint-Malo, suggests that without the sight of a particular character of the novel, "we are made to think of how the leaflets make contact with the ramparts, the rooftops, the ravines, the houses, the streets, and the cobbles," and further, "made to imagine how they land on the inhabitants there" (247). According to Doerr, the choice to focus on the material reality of the novel was intentional. In *Publisher's Weekly*, Doerr claims he is "kind of in love with the world" (Schulman 26). To write the story, he "needed to know what his characters would see and touch—he had to be able to imagine what would be on a character's bedroom dresser before he could write the character" (26). He says that students often "want to write about 'big things' like love or getting lost or heart-break, and they miss the simple message of staying in the *physical level all the time*" (26).⁷

It is the mark of a poet to take big ideas, especially as complicated as "light one cannot see," and communicate them through representations of the physical world without spelling everything out purely through exposition or dialogue. It is also the mark of a good reader to take words and imagine the story to which they point and, likewise, to be open to the affective dimensions a work can occasion. Marie-Laure is also, literally, a reader in this sense. She takes Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* and makes "the raised dots form letters, the letters words, the words a world" (Doerr 434).

Reader response criticism would be quick to point out that Marie-Laure helps to create the author's, Jules Verne's, in her case, *diegesis* through imagination. And, of course, this is always part of the story. Although one can agree that the lived reality of a story relies on both the author and the reader, something in excess of our own understanding enacts the creation of worlds within the

imagination, and it is in this imaginative creation that we circle back to Desmond's third sense of transcendence. Something other to the reader constitutes the world with which the reader engages. The reader does not know how or why these images form in the mind from language in any definitive sense. In a chapter entitled "Light," as Marie-Laure is learning the city "...she begins to get it right. She runs her fingers over the model in the kitchen, counting miniature benches, trees, lampposts, doorways. Every day some new detail emerges—each storm drain, park bench, and hydrant in the model has its counterpart in the real world" (40). There is a doubling at work here—perhaps a tripling if one considers the analogy between her and the reader. Words are akin to the models which she touches. The narrative gives the readers models, too, models that they only imagine. And, yet, these models navigate the reader toward images within the imagination. But, even now, we know very little about how this works.⁸ The imagination is overdetermined, entwined with the mystery of consciousness, which, while described and categorized, is not accounted for by science nor the philosophy of imagination in any univocal sense. Given that neither imagination nor consciousness can be observed, it remains outside of scientific study. While one might experience it from a subjective point of view, one cannot explain its origins or even how it operates in relation to works of literature. This, of course, doesn't preclude theorizing; it only points to the contingent nature of all theorizations.

The force that raises the words into a world is powered by third transcendence—beyond what Marie-Laure and the reader can fully know. Because she reads braille, Irving Goh believes her reading points to the importance of touch: "the sensation of touch that lies at the limit of life and death, or how touch reaffirms the sense of existence, making us aware too of the limit between one's existence and another's. In that latter regard, reading accompanied by touch is furthermore a matter of sharing the world" (257–8). It is important to note Goh's use of the word "aware" here. Even if touch is the conduit to the awareness, it is only ancillary to the awareness. The awareness itself is other to touch even if occasioned by it. But here we must again theorize *between*⁹ because awareness exists within phenomenological constraints in which an elusive subject foreign to our own consciousness is the one aware. In other words, nested within, or outside of, our own immanence is something to which we do not have access.

A kind of blindness, an indeterminacy, always exists in reading. Whatever visuals arise in the imagination are partly dependent on the words, partly dependent on the one reading, the location in which one reads, one's mood, one's culture, and other nuances. But it is also partly dependent on a force for which one cannot account. Marie-Laure, and even the reader, however, *knows* without knowing, forms without understanding the process whereby they form. I do not mean to be cryptic; I mean only to suggest that the knowledge that arises out of the material experience of the world, especially knowledge as weighty as Goh's reaffirmation of existence, is not knowledge that physical touch knows and is not occasioned by the self in any determinate sense. It comes from beyond. This beyond is not set against "within." Defining it that way would create a dichotomy whereby "beyond" is simply the opposite of within. Perhaps we might say that a second reader is at work within the imaginative process—a reader that illuminates, its light casting mysterious shadows, evoking images through the symbiosis of reader, experience, and literary work. Since one cannot define it, nor observe it, it is an Other Reader—perhaps the Superior Reader—or Readers. This is not to say that the superior reader is the same for everyone. It is not about the particularities of what happens when one "imagines," but, rather, that anything happens at all when reading. To explain it away as only a mechanism of the subject or the result of well-wrought prose is to ignore the mystery inherent in the reading process. Of course, neither Doerr's novel nor Marie-Laure are unique examples of these realities at work. But because the novel is concerned with invisible light, one would be remiss to ignore the dynamics of reading and illumination at work in her story.

Toward the end of the novel, one can see what I call the second, or superior, reader at work. During Werner's final scene, the narrative point of view shifts to an American soldier or to an

unnamable narrator (it is a bit ambiguous) and describes Werner's death at a remove, much like the narrator did in the beginning when the Ally planes dropped leaflets on Saint-Malo. When, after saving Marie Laure and realizing the Germans surrender, Werner steps on a mine and explodes in a "fountain of earth" (483). The fountain metaphor does not exist within a material framework. It is an imaginative correlative; it does not simply relate the concrete details of Werner's death. The power of touch, or any sense of the material, cannot account for the poetry used to represent this moment. Likewise, the narrative perspective exists in a liminal, indefinable place, without human perspective. Rather than planted by a soldier, the mine erupts from the earth, suggesting that Werner's death occurs in three realities: the material (explosion), immaterial (fountain), and a strange sense of a further immateriality (explosion as fountain). The juxtaposition between tenor and the vehicle of the metaphor occasions something else. Perhaps, by way of analogy, the poetic view itself is given weight by a wholly transcendent force. More than a traitor, or a Nazi, who accidentally steps on a mine, he is swallowed by a fountain, suggesting a kind of apotheosis for Werner or a celebration of his generosity and a memorial to youthful imagination. The narrative voice, detached from any character, elicits an affective response. How does the conceit work? On one level, it would be easy to say the reader understands why Werner disappears into a fountain of earth rather being blown up by a mine; he is redeemed. But, yet, how does the reader know that these are images of redemption? Is it simply the result of archetypal patterns? Perhaps so. But, even that does not explain the "otherness" outside of the metaphor—or the otherness immanent in archetypes. It is rich with possibility but never finality.

Desmond believes the relationships between philosophy, art, and religion are porous, each relating to each other in myriad ways (*Arts, Origins*, 1, 2). Rather than silos of thought, inherent in conceptualizations of each is a superior Other that unites our discussions about them. The third transcendence, obviously, has a mystic quality. In the simplest terms, however, it is that for which philosophy, theories of art, and even religious sensibilities cannot exhaustively codify. Doerr's novel, through its emphasis on blindness, points to the extent to which this force is always beyond the horizon of what one can know with the mind but what one can feel, nevertheless. It is the river in which creator and beholder swim, participants in a mystery that reaches back to our first wanderings, our first questions about being, and our first stories to make sense of it all.

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Notes

- ¹ I use the term "art" broadly to indicate imaginative works of the plastic arts, literary arts, and musical arts.
- ² Desmond is careful here to explain that what calls to us is not dominating us while we are passive. Rather, the offer that arises from this Other, is an offer beyond objectification (*Being and the Between* 10–11).
- ³ For Schopenhauer, music, because it is "untranslatable into ... reason that the inner nature of all life and existence expresses itself" (452), elicits a total release from suffering through the subject's experience of the Pure Will. Schopenhauer explains the experience of art through his schema of the suffering will versus the pure Will, the *thing-in-itself*, or the essence of everything. For Schopenhauer, the suffering "individual will" finds release in the work of art and is able to glimpse the ultimate reality, "What is life?" which is the original Will objectified (452). At first glance, the Pure Will seems very much like Desmond's idea of Third Transcendence. Desmond, however, believes that Schopenhauer's schema reflects the second sense of transcendence rather than the third. Desmond wonders how Schopenhauer's Pure Will can release the subject from the suffering through art if the individual will is also the source of that suffering. For Desmond, Schopenhauer's Will lies in a cave below Plato's cave:

What kind of strange original is this, if the darkness casts shadows only apparently more lightsome than the original self? To know this thing itself would be to know an original that, in a way, is no original, that casts less images than vanishing shadows of 'itself.' Do not these shadows then compound the darkness, not dispel it? What could art do to dispel the shadows of this impenetrably dark ground under the first underground? (*Arts, Origins* 132)

In other words, if the individual will causes the suffering of the subject, then the Pure Will must be the ground of this suffering, so there can be no relief. The images cast by the Pure Will, perhaps one might say "uncaused suffering" given Schopenhauer's insistence on the Will's universality, are shadows, making the representations on the wall "shadows of itself" (*Art, Origins* 132)—or shadows of shadows.

- ⁴This evokes some of the same imagery as Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," which is appropriate given it is a poem about the Romantic Other.
- ⁵Where this comes from, what Desmond also calls the "originary otherness," cannot be explained (*Being Between* 254).
- ⁶One can see in the above examples from the novel, especially Volkheimer and Werner's final sections, wherein Volkheimer and Werner listen to "Clare de Lune," that the power of music in the novel elicits the third transcendence rather than Schopenhauer's second—self-determining transcendence—for Volkheimer does not have a memory of listening to the song. He is not even listening to the song in the flashback with his grandfather. In the novel, something exists outside of Werner and Volkheimer's experiences of the world for them both to undergo the same sense of transcendence.
- ⁷A tension exists between Doerr's focus on the physical world and my suggestion that the novel points to a force greater than the physical. The music that evokes wonder is often coupled with scientific and mathematical ideas. "Clare de Lune" is the introduction to the scientific broadcast that leads Werner to his love of science. Marie-Laure ends up a biologist at the end of the novel. Even Doerr attributes the light referenced in the title to invisible radio waves, avoiding any talk of the metaphysical (Schulman 27). But, within the novel itself, one sees a marked difference between the two. For instance, when Werner discovers that the radio program he listened to as a child broadcasts messages to allies, he, at first, thinks "*Only numbers. Pure math. You have to accustom yourself to thinking that way,*" an echo of what one of his superiors told him earlier in the novel (emphasis Doerr's 388). The ending of the novel, however, suggests that when one loses wonder, in this case separating humanity from what animates it, one reduces it to something calculable and disposable. In failing to honor the light one cannot see in the human face, one dehumanizes it. When Werner finds the house from which Marie-Laure transmits the signal to the allies, he remembers words from the broadcast he heard as a child: "Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever" (409). Of course, what the voice encourages him to see is not the target of Nazi aggression. It is not simply a transmitter affixed to the house, either. The eyes see the materiality of the antenna, but he also sees the birthplace of his love for science before it was adulterated by Nazi propaganda, memories of him bonding with Jutta while listening to the broadcasts, and, perhaps, most importantly, the humanity of the people inside the house, voices that have never left him despite his indoctrination (to which he is not wholly, at least internally, complicit).
- ⁸Kind writes in the introduction to the *Routledge Handbook to the Philosophy of Imagination* that there is not a univocal understanding of what imagination is (1). There are further discussions of "Fiction and Imagination" (Stock 204-216), "Art and Imagination" (Meskin and Wiltsher (179-191), *etcetera* that, while categorizing relationships between artworks, representation, and imagination, make no claims about the source of imagination.
- ⁹This is a word Desmond often uses when discussing metaxological thinking. See *Being and the Between*.

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