

The Art of Astonishment: Reflections on Gifts and Grace, by Alice Brittan

Bloomsbury Academic. 2022. x + 222.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-8357-1; PB: 978-1-5013-8356-4; ePDF: 978-1-5013-8359-5

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The Art of Astonishment: Reflections on Gifts and Grace (2022) by Alice Brittan is a rich tapestry of extensive cultural knowledge and intimate personal experience. The stories of Hermes and other trickster figures are strands woven throughout the narrative revealing the flexible and often surprising presence of grace. Although Brittan's book stands on its own, familiarity with Lewis Hyde's *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World* and *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* will enrich a reading of her book, two texts that especially inspired Brittan and which she cites throughout. Brittan's style is also indebted to Hyde, as she intersperses quotable pithy statements—for instance, “Grace is always undue, an event that can never be earned or willed” (32) and “Grace is a form of excess, which is why it is always an experience of refreshment and increase” (144)—with in-depth explorations of case studies and insightful readings of a diverse range of texts. Brittan's erudition emulates Hyde's, as she coherently synthesises a host of diverse sources, crossing the boundaries, Hermes-like, of anthropology, history, politics, economics, philosophy, religious studies, literature (classic and contemporary), myth, folklore and fairy tales. Some of the more recent writers she discusses include J.M. Coetzee, Paul Celan, Toni Morrison, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Jhumpa Lahiri, Annie Dillard, NoViolet Bulawayo and Michael Ondaatje. She builds on and extends Hyde's ideas, adding a valuable feminist perspective, and she weaves intimate and often unsettling stories of her own life and family life into the narrative.

Her main aim is to illustrate the continuing importance of the gift and charity to the twenty-first century despite (or because of) the almost hegemonic money- and contract-based modern culture and economy. She shows how charity and the gift are not unique to Christianity but are features of many religious traditions and cultures, the Graces of



Journal of Literary Studies

<https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/jls>

Volume 38 | Number 3 | 2022 | #11721 | 3 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/1753-5387/11721>

ISSN 1753-5387 (Online)

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Ancient Greece being just one example. She shows the important surviving remnants of the gift economy that preceded the modern money economy and that yet remain, mainly in the form of art, the main source of value. In Chapter 1, entitled “Grace,” Brittan describes Ancient Greece’s transition from a gift-giving culture to one based on money, noting the poet Simonides’s ambivalence towards and Aristotle’s approval of this shift from *charis* to coinage: “We don’t tend to feel much gratitude for things that we have paid for or earned on the clock, and Simonides feared that this would make it difficult for his customers to appreciate or even understand his poems” (26). However, even Aristotle acknowledged the importance of charity when he wrote that the law should not be so inflexible as to be unable to account for the individual case: “The equitable man is not overly just, says Aristotle” (71). Gift giving was the preserve of the elite, whereas the money economy assumed equivalence, and was therefore essential to democracy and law. Yet money was not enough: “Sometimes grace was needed to temper justice” (144).

Despite her extensive erudition, Brittan does not perhaps sufficiently consider the more sanguinary ethics of gift-giving cultures like the Ancient Germanic *comitatus*. Here the lord’s generosity consisted in distributing gifts from the throne—the *gifstōl*—hence the description “the lord of the rings,” bestowing largess on his warriors in proportion to their loyalty in battle, the acquisition of the treasure in the first place being tribute, plunder, and the spoils of war. However, not everything can be included in one book and Brittan does, in fact, explore the darker side of charity and gift-giving. In Chapter 2, entitled “Charity,” Brittan claims that the relationship between charity and social class “has been of primary importance to the South African Nobel Laureate, J.M. Coetzee” (53). Showing a deep familiarity with South African history and politics, Brittan persuasively argues that charity is a central theme of all Coetzee’s work, even though he, like her, is a secular thinker. This includes a discussion of the importance of empathy but also its limitations, as Martha Nussbaum came to realise. Indeed, it should be kept in mind that Coetzee (2001, 4) uses the term “sympathetic imagination” rather than “empathy” in *The Lives of Animals*.

Chapter 3, “Secrets,” playing on the similarity between “Hermes” and “hermeneutics,” includes a fascinating exploration of cryptography. It begins, however, with an analysis of Wim Wenders’s *Wings of Desire* and a reading of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Chapter 4, entitled “Shame,” also foregrounds social class and poverty, drawing much from Brittan’s own family history, exploring among other things the fear of dependence on charity. The chapter includes a critique of colonialism and its false gifts. The more disturbing facts of Brittan’s family history are most pronounced in Chapter 5, “Patience.” The myth of Perseus features prominently in the final chapter, “Rest,” although with a surprising feminist twist, which concludes with the insight that “[g]ifts always arrive when people are resting or looking the other way” (178). This feminist perspective is just one of many valuable strands woven throughout the rich tapestry of *The Art of Astonishment*, a book that is guaranteed to surprise most readers with its sometimes disturbing but always fascinating insights.

References

Coetzee, J. M. 2001. *The Lives of Animals*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.