Introduction

Toward a Psychological Enfranchisement of Art

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote the poem *Archaic Torso of Apollo* in France in 1908. He was greatly inspired by August Rodin to whom he dedicated *The New Poems II*, the collection in which it first appeared. Apparently, Rilke was enthused by seeing a sculpture of a torso – as such, without head, arms or legs. Still, even without a head this torso possessed a particularly demanding stare. “You must change your life,” its gaze insisted through Rilke’s pen.

The poem was allegedly created at a time when Rilke himself was changing or had just done so. It was written in the period in which he gradually became a mature poet, his biographer Hajo Drees (2001) writes. Perhaps, with some guessing, this closing line of the poem is a materialization of Rilke’s own desire to change his life or his declaration of actually having done so. Rilke’s experience with this torso, whether real or imagined, is largely unknown, however. Except for his extraordinary experience, we know neither how nor why he came to this conclusion. We do not know much about the particular object of this experience or how he subjectively felt while before it; we do not know how his wonder and awe in facing this torso lead him to the particularly consequential statement that “you must change your life.” Did this torso actually create in him such affects and desires – and if so, then how? In this particular case it is unlikely that we shall have a sufficient answer, yet answers to questions in relation to the powers of the aesthetic on a more general level are precisely what this book seeks. It is a seeking in the concrete, one which should be beyond guessing, by the thoroughgoing application of systematic and stringent methodological inquiry.

The task at hand is to investigate aesthetic experience, not limited to experiences where the subject undergoes personal change, or feels like changing, to the extent which Rilke claimed he should. This book is not only about experiences with the aesthetic where it is Grand Art, and where the transformation of the subject is explicitly radical. It is also about aesthetic experiences that are more subtle, less conspicuous, and not immediately obvious. It is about
how people experience art, not limited to how artists like Rilke experience it, and includes aesthetic experiences of those who do not necessarily draw upon a high-level, artistic educational background.

In contrast to philosophical inquiries that have long been interested in the aesthetic, it is a psychological investigation that draws upon concrete experiences without resorting to naïve empiricism. The investigation therefore fluctuates (not dialectically but hermeneutically) between the empirical material and relevant, extant aesthetic theory in order to arrive at a synthesis which gives form and meaning to aesthetic experience.

In *Truth and Method* (1960), Hans-Georg Gadamer starts by citing a poem by Rilke. Gadamer’s main topic is the truth claims of the humanities and social sciences (Geisteswissenshaften), which are on the verge of adopting a position of claiming truth present in the natural sciences, thereby undermining their own position in the quest for knowledge and understanding. Toward this end, Gadamer begins by questioning how understanding occurs, arguing that understanding is not granted or secured by method, but takes place through taking part in tradition that is handed down via language throughout history. More specifically, Gadamer illuminates the nature of understanding, knowledge, method, and truth by penetrating aesthetics and arts; expressly the type of experience which arises in relation to art. The reason why Gadamer investigates the nature of experiences with art is because he sees art as exemplary of a mode of understanding which operates beyond the mode of understanding present in the natural sciences. He shows how the natural sciences need to delimit their truth claims based upon the mode in which understanding and experience occurs in relation to art.

Throughout this book it should become apparent that psychology in its more natural scientific garb needs to restrain its claims to truth when it comes to the aesthetic: it operates with considerable reductions through which its object is lost. That the aesthetic demarcates the limits of other fields of inquiry is old news, however. Art has been regarded as autonomous, as comprising the “totality of tensions,” as sufficient onto itself. The aesthetic has, since its modern conception been regarded, at times, as that which limits what philosophy (and, accordingly, what psychology) can claim as true, or claim as having knowledge about. The limits of psychology are just as defined by the incapacities of language as are the limits of philosophy; the gap between experience and word sets the limits for both fields of inquiry (save that part of psychology which is practical, operating in the realm of behavior which lies before language). For instance, Martin Seel (2000) makes an indispensable contribution [to philosophy] because it uncovers a dimension of reality that evades epistemic fixation but is nonetheless an aspect of knowable reality.” According to this line, the philosopher and psychologist David Favrholdt says that