

Alberto MERZARI *

The Hermeneutical Experience of Art

Stefano Marino and Elena Romagnoli (eds.), *Gadamer on Art and Aesthetic Experience: Rethinking Hermeneutical Aesthetics Today*. State University of New York Press, 2025, 217 pp., \$120.00 (hbk), ISBN 9798855800968

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The collective volume *Gadamer on Art and Aesthetic Experience: Rethinking Hermeneutical Aesthetics Today*, published this year by SUNY Press and featuring contributions from some of the most prominent international scholars of the German philosopher, sets out—as its title suggests—to ask whether Gadamer’s hermeneutical approach still has something meaningful to offer to contemporary aesthetic theory. The editors Stefano Marino and Elena Romagnoli, two important voices in both Italian and international Gadamer scholarship, explain in the introduction that this is not only a legitimate question but an urgent one. Although Gadamer’s thought decisively shaped the philosophical debates of the late 20th century, directly or indirectly, its presence seems to have waned in recent years, particularly within the Continental tradition increasingly dominated by French theory. This may indeed reflect the ebb and flow of intellectual trends, as the editors themselves concede, but it also raises a more fundamental question: is Gadamer’s thought incapable of addressing the challenges posed by the contemporary aesthetic landscape?

Gadamer on Art and Aesthetic Experience aims to counter this hypothesis by reactivating latent dimensions of the hermeneutic tradition within aesthetics, as well as by unsettling the apparent familiarity of Gadamer’s theory precisely where it risks appearing most conventional or outdated. The ten essays collected in the volume take up this from very diverse, at times even heterogeneous, perspectives. What unites them is an effort to clarify how Gadamer sought to move beyond, on the one hand, the Romantic-subjectivist conception of art and, on the other, to preserve the link between art and truth.

The opening essay by Jean Grondin—currently chair of the scientific board of the Gadamer-Gesellschaft—focuses on the category of *Darstellung*, which he identifies as a covertly central concept in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. By

* PhD, Academy of Fine Arts of Urbino, Italy.
Email: alberto.merzari@accademiadiurbino.it

surveying its meanings, dimensions, and possible translations into European languages—curiously without referencing the traditional conceptual opposition between *Darstellung* and *Vorstellung*—the Canadian philosopher argues that to think that “there is no artwork without *Darstellung*” is to conceive of art as a form of truth that is constitutively interpretive, performative, eventual, and—most importantly—unattainable apart from the increase in being (*Seinszuwachs*) that the artwork itself effects.

Grondin’s contribution traces out several trajectories that are fruitfully developed by other essays in the volume. In particular, the two editors—who also each contribute an essay—examine respectively the practical and performative dimensions of *Darstellung*, both aiming to liberate Gadamer’s aesthetics from the twin extremes of metaphysical and post-metaphysical readings. Marino and Romagnoli indeed seek to affirm Gadamer’s genuine move beyond a subjectivist (or, more broadly, substantialist) theorisation of aesthetic experience, while avoiding the misstep of interpreting this move in nihilistic terms. This effort, shared implicitly by several contributions, stands out—let us say it from the outset—as one of the volume’s greatest merits. In doing so, it remedies the long-standing interpretative hegemony, especially in Italy but not only, of Vattimo’s grand reading of Gadamer, which often conflated Gadamer’s path with Nietzsche’s and thereby neutralised some of the most original dimensions of Gadamer’s hermeneutic project.

Stefano Marino, whose research has long centred on Gadamer, here returns to the foundations of Gadamer’s theory of interpretation by engaging with his relation to Book VI of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, especially the virtue of *phronesis*. Marino’s reference to the Aristotelian sources serves to highlight that the aesthetic and the practical domains form an inseparable continuum in Gadamer’s hermeneutics. It is not simply that the act of interpretation involved in the aesthetic experience, like the ethical action, mediates between universality and particularity, but that the ethical and aesthetic levels mutually co-determine one another: aesthetic experience shapes, and is shaped by, our understanding of the world and our capacity to act within it.

Elena Romagnoli, who recently translated Gadamer’s writings on Paul Celan into Italian, foregrounds the performative dimension of art forms seemingly distant from performance—such as literary-textual or visual-pictorial art. Challenging Günter Figal’s well-known view that Gadamer distinguishes two paradigms of art, one performative (based on the model of play) and one ontological (based on the model of picture), and that in the latter paradigm Gadamer fails to fully overcome subjectivism, Romagnoli argues that a proper account of the experience of reading reveals how both play and performance underpin Gadamer’s unified aesthetic vision. To invoke the two key terms from the volume’s title, if Marino draws attention to the unity of experience, Romagnoli invites us to consider the unity of the aesthetic.

Moving to the invited contributors, John Arthos and Georg W. Bertram offer particularly noteworthy analyses of Gadamer's dialogues with his arguably most decisive philosophical interlocutors together with Aristotle: respectively, Heidegger and Hegel. Bertram pits Hegel, in a certain sense, against Gadamer, offering the most audacious critique in the volume of the limitations of Gadamer's hermeneutics. He begins with a provocative question: from a Gadamerian perspective, what distinguishes aesthetic experience from other kinds of experience, if all are subsumed under a universal process of understanding? Bertram's compelling thesis is that aesthetic experience possesses a distinct richness and exemplariness that secure its unique role within the hermeneutic circle. While other experiences involve a first-order process of understanding, aesthetic experience—Bertram claims—compels us to reflect on the very conditions that make understanding possible. Aesthetic experience thus emerges as a kind of "second-order" experience. On this basis, he proposes both a refinement of hermeneutical aesthetics and a reconsideration of Gadamer's critique of Romanticism. The only regrettable omission in Bertram's interesting analysis is a more sustained engagement with Heidegger's position in "The Origin of the Work of Art," which could arguably be interpreted along similar lines.

Arthos, for his part, insightfully shows how Gadamer shares with Heidegger a liminal and somewhat paradoxical ontology of the artwork—as something suspended between form and formlessness, or, to borrow the Heideggerian phrase that gives Arthos's essay its title, as an unshapely form. On the one hand, the artwork presents itself to interpretation with a defined structure. On the other one, being never separable from interpretation, that structure is never final, but always open and unfinished. Arthos compellingly argues that this paradox must not be resolved by privileging one of these dimensions over the other, but rather that the productive tension between them constitutes the innermost trait of hermeneutical aesthetics. By identifying the field of play of art as neither purely sensible nor purely ideal, neither fully anchored in the present of its offering nor entirely projected beyond it, Arthos's contribution comes close to reading in Gadamer what I would describe as an imaginal interpretation of the artwork.

From a related but distinct angle, Alessandro Bertinetto brings further illumination to the paradox articulated by Arthos. A long-time scholar of the concept of improvisation, Bertinetto finds in Gadamer's hermeneutics—as well as in Luigi Pareyson's—a fertile ground for thinking improvisational practice. Against the apparent opposition between interpretation, which presupposes a pre-existing text, and improvisation, which seemingly relies on its absence, Bertinetto shows that both, when situated in the context of art, share a dynamic, evolving structure, responsive to agents and circumstances alike: every hermeneutic *Darstellung* carries an improvisational character, and every

improvisation involves an interpretive dimension. In his conclusion, Bertinetto even suggests that improvisation offers a paradigmatic model for artistic creativity as such.

The volume also includes contributions by Mariannina Failla, James Risser, Gert-Jan van der Heiden, and Cynthia R. Nielsen. Failla traces the metaphysical—particularly (neo-)Platonic and Cusan—roots of Gadamer's hermeneutics. The remaining three essays focus on poetry from different angles. Risser—a prolific writer on Gadamer—revives the underexplored category of rhythm, arguing that poetry discloses meanings beyond the conceptual content of its words through the rhythmic structuring of experience. Van der Heiden revisits the Heideggerian distinction between thinking and poetising, showing how, for Gadamer, poetic language uniquely draws attention to itself. While conceptual language disappears behind what it reveals, the poetic word evokes what can never be fully revealed and thus never steps aside but remains present in its opacity and ambiguity. Nielsen—author of the recent *Gadamer's Hermeneutical Aesthetics: Art as a Performative, Dynamic, Communal Event* (Routledge, 2023)—examines here Gadamer's reading of Celan to remind us that hermeneutics sometimes risks overlooking the wounds of history that alone, at times, disclose the full meaning of poetry and of artworks more broadly.

Taken together, as seen, the volume revisits in an original way several foundational questions in Gadamer's aesthetic reflection—especially in relation to poetry and literature—and offers a thoughtful repositioning of his work within its broader philosophical context. *Gadamer on Art and Aesthetic Experience* crucially avoids any hagiographic tone, presenting instead a Gadamer that feels alive, stripped of interpretive clichés, and capable—through resonance or contrast—of sparking fresh thought. Most importantly, as noted, it succeeds in showing from multiple perspectives how the hermeneutical experience of art resists both nostalgic regression and nihilistic dismissal of the problem of truth in art. For all these reasons, it will be a valuable resource both for scholars of Gadamer and for those coming from the field of aesthetics who, perhaps under the influence of the afore-mentioned trends, may wish to (re)discover the generative potential of the hermeneutical paradigm.

The book's only limitation is that the specificities and tensions of today's art world sometimes fall in the background and risk being absorbed into Gadamer's universalist framework. This narrowing of focus was, in many ways, inevitable: before we can rethink today's aesthetics hermeneutically, we must first revisit and clarify the meaning of hermeneutical aesthetics today—which is precisely what this volume undertakes and perfectly accomplishes. Having done so—guided by the very tools the book provides—we may now begin to ask what a hermeneutic response might look like to pressing issues in the art world. For example, that of the AI-generated art: would Gadamer adopt a pragmatic

view, focusing mainly on the artwork's capacity to draw us into its play of meaning? Or would the absence of historicity and lived linguistic experience on the part of the AI "artist" disqualify such works from being considered art in the first place? Furthermore, can Gadamer's hermeneutics still serve as a resource in decolonial or pluralist aesthetic contexts? Or does his hermeneutic schema inescapably presuppose the macro-horizon of a singular polis/polos—as the exemplarity of the Attic tragedy, which the volume too recalls, apparently suggest? And finally, what about the "conceptualisation" (Danto) or "vaporisation" of art (Michaud), or the emergence of possible new paradigms of attention (Bishop)? Might Gadamer offer conceptual tools for critically engaging these epochal shifts?

Günther Figal, to whose memory the volume is dedicated, had already begun extending Gadamer's legacy into some of these territories—a challenge that current scholarship has taken up only partially. By pursuing also this second phase of the inquiry, we will fully be in the position to assess how much we need hermeneutics today, or whether our epoch is now irreversibly shaped by the other current of Heidegger's legacy, namely, deconstruction.

For now, by presenting a vibrant, intellectually vital Gadamer, the volume edited by Marino and Romagnoli leaves us with a keen sense of what we are missing in our neglect of the hermeneutic tradition. A master of a humanism, which is not—as Heidegger feared—a closure around the human, but rather, as Heidegger himself in other terms envisioned, the realisation of the human in openness, Gadamer teaches us without any paternalism to look beyond an age that often seems incapable of building and dwelling—to borrow from the poet: how to be men, not destroyers. .