

Interpreting Life from Life Itself: Wilhelm Dilthey's Hermeneutical Aesthetics

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Poetry is a passion, not a habit. This passion nourishes itself on reality. Imagination has no source except in reality, and ceases to have any value when it departs from reality. Here is a fundamental principle about the imagination: It does not create except as it transforms. . . . Imagination gives, but gives in relation.
—Wallace Stevens, Notes on “The Man with the Blue Guitar”²

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833–1911) is a well-known figure in the history of hermeneutics, although Dilthey scholars would argue that his contributions to hermeneutics are largely overlooked. There are several contributing factors to this issue. First and foremost, Dilthey's philosophy is often studied indirectly through *Being and Time* and *Truth and Method*, which means more prominent philosophers like Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer have been responsible for his reception in hermeneutics.³ Both Heidegger and Gadamer present their approach to hermeneutics in opposition

¹ This article is dedicated to the memory of Rudolf Makkreel with gratitude for his encouragement and guidance. I am also grateful for the constructive criticism I received from an anonymous reviewer, which was very helpful in revising the framework for my paper's argument.

² Wallace Stevens, “To Hi Simons, Hartford, Connecticut, August 10, 1940,” in *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 363–64.

³ Heidegger describes his analysis of Dasein in *Being and Time* as “in the service of Dilthey's work” (GA 2: 404 / BT: 455). *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); *Sein und Zeit in Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 2, ed. F. W. von Hermann (Frankfurt, Germany: Klostermann, 1977). Gadamer critiques Dilthey's approach to hermeneutics in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), 53 – 61 and 214 – 235.

to Dilthey. Yet, as Dilthey scholars have demonstrated, Heidegger's and Gadamer's polemics often rest on misinterpretations or caricatures of Dilthey's philosophy and, moreover, do not fully acknowledge their indebtedness to his thought.⁴ As a result, Dilthey is often misunderstood when he is acknowledged at all.

Perhaps a more interesting issue than determining philosophical debt is the fact that much of Dilthey's implicitly hermeneutical philosophy is not read as hermeneutics because he did not label it as such. Jean Grondin explains that while many of Dilthey's philosophical projects could be considered hermeneutics according to contemporary philosophical usage, Dilthey would not have understood his work this way because the term hermeneutics "was still too exotic for his time."⁵ Dilthey was the first philosopher to adapt hermeneutics for philosophy. Previously, hermeneutics had been a theological project aimed at interpreting religious texts. This fact means that during Dilthey's time, philosophical hermeneutics was in its infancy and its full range of possibilities and applications had not been developed yet. By contrast, when Gadamer published *Truth and Method*, hermeneutics was a "suddenly fashionable term."⁶ These shifts in the meaning and popularity of hermeneutics can make it difficult to place Dilthey within its history in a way that does justice to his insights. At the same time, Grondin points out that Heidegger's early existential hermeneutics fulfills Dilthey's goal to interpret life from life itself and Gadamer's *Truth and Method* takes up Dilthey's goal of articulating the way the human sciences understand life in ways that are distinct from the methods of the natural sciences.⁷ For these reasons, Grondin suggests that Dilthey scholars "enjoy the hermeneutics of the

⁴ One of the most thorough accounts of Dilthey's influence on Heidegger is Robert Scharff, *Heidegger Becoming Phenomenological: Interpreting Husserl Through Dilthey, 1916–1925* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019). Theodore Kisiel also provides a detailed account of the "Dilthey Draft" of *Being and Time* (see *The Genesis of Heidegger's Being and Time* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]). For analysis of Gadamer's misinterpretation of Dilthey, see Frithjof Rodi, "Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life: A Critique of Gadamer's Interpretation of Dilthey," in *Hermeneutics and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Don Ihde (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 82–90. I argue for reinterpreting Dilthey's influence on Heidegger in Rebecca A. Longtin, "From Factual Life to Art: Reconsidering Heidegger's Appropriation of Dilthey," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 59, no. 4 (2021): 653–78.

⁵ Jean Grondin, "Dilthey's Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 254.

⁶ Grondin, "Dilthey's Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics," 260.

⁷ In his 1920 lecture course *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, Heidegger explicitly takes up Dilthey's "ultimate philosophical motive: to interpret life from out of itself, primordially" (Martin Heidegger, *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression*, trans. Tracy Colony [New York: Continuum, 2010], 119).

twentieth century for what it is, an impressive continuation and realization of the type of philosophy Dilthey envisioned and that can rightly be called a hermeneutics.”⁸

Dilthey’s philosophy thus presents us with the hermeneutical task of making the implicit more explicit. Reading Dilthey’s work through a contemporary perspective reveals that much of his philosophy can be read as hermeneutics, especially insofar as his main goal was to interpret life from life itself. To this end, I will outline some general features of Dilthey’s approach to aesthetics and explain how it could be interpreted as a hermeneutics. While some scholars have treated Dilthey’s aesthetics as peripheral to his philosophy, Rudolf A. Makkreel considers it to be vital in the development of his philosophy. Makkreel argues that Dilthey’s inquiries into art allowed him to reformulate and refine his philosophical approach over the course of his life.⁹ Dilthey’s aesthetics thus provides a rich ground for unearthing his goals, theories, and methods as a hermeneutical philosopher.

The first section explains the historical impetus for Dilthey to revise aesthetic theory in a way that is implicitly hermeneutical. The second section outlines Dilthey’s concept of artistic creation as poetic metamorphosis, which grounds aesthetics in the dynamics of everyday lived experience. The third section explains how Dilthey’s descriptive psychology outlines a hermeneutic understanding of lived experience and artistic creation. The last section explains how Dilthey understands art as a mode of interpretation that articulates what is meaningful in life. Throughout this paper I will argue that what we find in Dilthey’s aesthetics is coherent with contemporary hermeneutical aesthetics. Namely, art is not simply an object for hermeneutics to interpret. Art is itself a powerful act of interpreting life.

New Forms of Life and the Need for New Aesthetic Theories

The historical context for Dilthey’s aesthetic theory sets up the need to interpret art differently than philosophers had in the past. New art styles had emerged in the nineteenth century that challenged past traditions and norms for making, presenting, interpreting, evaluating, and understanding art. Dilthey’s aesthetics can be read as a hermeneutical response not only because it responds to the need for new modes of interpretation, but also because he understands the need to recontextualize art within history and culture and to critically examine inherited traditions. This section will give

⁸ Grondin, “Dilthey’s Hermeneutics and Philosophical Hermeneutics,” 265.

⁹ Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Dilthey: Philosopher of the Human Studies*, 3rd printing (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 15–17.

an overview of how Dilthey is situated in the history of art and aesthetic theory and explain its relevance for a hermeneutical approach to aesthetics that is grounded in life.

In *The Imagination of the Poet: Elements for a Poetics* (1887) and *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task* (1892), Dilthey situates his approach to aesthetics in response to the profound discord between previous theories of art and the works of art of his time. Dilthey describes the artworld at the end of the nineteenth century as an *anarchy of taste* in which “the artist is forsaken by rules; the critic is thrown back upon his personal feeling as the only remaining standard of evaluation” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31).¹⁰ This anarchy of taste is not simply pernicious to art theory or criticism, however; it also affects the status of art in society and the development of art in general. For Dilthey, the role of aesthetics is to support the status of art in society, clarify its purpose, and establish principles that encourage the development of “a lasting style and a coherent artistic tradition” (GS 6: 106 / SW V: 33). Aesthetic theory provides reflection on the significance of art and cultivates the intellectual attitudes that allow for artistic creation and art appreciation. For Dilthey, “art requires the thorough schooling and education of the artist and the public through aesthetic reflections if its higher aspirations are to be unfolded, appreciated, and defended” (GS 6: 106–107 / SW V: 33). For these reasons, the anarchy of taste at the end of the nineteenth century seemed particularly dangerous to the status of art. These works of art expressed the fact that artists “had developed an aversion to thinking about art, sometimes even to every kind of higher culture” (GS 6: 106 / SW V: 32). Artists’ aversion to theory and the democratization of taste seemed to deny any possibility for re-establishing a relationship between aesthetics and works of art. Yet Dilthey did not identify such a crisis as the end of art, like Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. For Dilthey, such an “anarchy of taste always characterizes periods when a new feeling of reality has shattered the existing forms and rules, and when new forms of art are striving to unfold” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). Dilthey understood the need for art to reflect the changes in society and new ways of thinking. Art movements that emphasize reality above theory, which Dilthey describes as *naturalism*, indicate such shifts in society. According to Dilthey, in “every such time of crisis, naturalism appears. It destroys the

¹⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Poetry and Experience: Wilhelm Dilthey Selected Works* [SW], vol. V, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); *Die Geistige Welt: Einleitung in die Philosophie des Lebens. Zweite Hälfte: Abhandlungen zur Poetik, Ethik und Pädagogik*, in *Wilhelm Dilthey, Gesammelte Schriften* [GS], vol. 6, ed. Georg Misch (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962). Dilthey’s works are abbreviated according to the volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* [GS] followed by the page number of the original German then the page number of the English translation from *Selected Works* [SW].

worn-out language of form; it attaches itself to reality, seeking to obtain something new from it” (GS 6: 285 / SW V: 220). At times it is necessary for art to break from previous aesthetic concepts, but this does not mark an essential dissonance between art and theory. Instead, the task for aesthetics is to respond to these new forms of art by revising its theory.

Dilthey outlines two main approaches to philosophy of art and art criticism, what he refers to as the Classicists and the Romantics, and explains how modern art rebels against both. The Classicists include eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century philosophers and art critics (e.g., Boileau, Gottsched, and Lessing) who adopt Aristotle’s *Poetics* as the model for art and approach art through general forms and rules about what art should portray and how it should do so. Since Aristotle thinks of art as mimesis, an imitation of what we observe in reality, Classicists approach art as a representation of the world. This concept of art gives formal rules that determine whether art is successful in representing reality. By contrast, for the Romantics, art does not imitate mundane reality, but instead transcends it. Romantics considered art to be the highest form of thought because it expresses the spiritual reality of the mind.

Artists at the end of the nineteenth century, however, were not interested in ideal representations like the Classicists or transcendence like the Romantics and came into direct conflict with the expectations of what art should be. In literature, Honoré de Balzac’s and Charles Dickens’ commonplace subject matters, urban settings, depictions of mundane details, and mass appeal contradicted traditional theories of art.¹¹ The lofty concepts of the Romantics with their emphasis on the sublime and art as the highest form of thought did not seem applicable to the realism of such novels. Similarly, the Classicists with their emphasis on traditional form, nature, and the idyllic became irrelevant as “soon as Dickens and Balzac began to write the epic of modern life” (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). In *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics*, Dilthey describes these new literary styles as an effort to “express the oppressive feeling that the structures of life in society have become old, senile, and untenable” (GS 6: 243 / SW V: 176). By emphasizing the mundane and commonplace, art attempted to overthrow these worn-out structures and rediscover the world in a genuine sense. As Dilthey describes, “It wants to manifest reality, as it actually is” (GS 6: 243 / SW V: 176).

¹¹ For a more thorough explanation of Dilthey’s literary theory, see Kristen Gjesdal, “A Task Most Pressing: Dilthey’s Philosophy of the Novel and His Rewriting of Modern Aesthetics,” in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 200–16; Kurt Müller-Vollmer, *Towards a Phenomenological Theory of Literature: A Study of Wilhelm Dilthey’s Poetik* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1963).



Edouard Manet, *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*The Luncheon on the Grass*) (1862–1863), oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. Public Domain:
<https://www.wikiart.org/en/edouard-manet/the-luncheon-on-the-grass-1863>.

In the visual arts, this conflict between art and theory is marked by a particular historical event: the *Salon des Refusés* (Salon of the Rejected). In 1863, nearly 3,000 works of art—about half of the submissions—were rejected by the Paris Salon's jury. In response to this unprecedented event and the protests of artists, Emperor Napoleon III formed an exhibition of the rejected art for the purpose of allowing the public, rather than the jury of the Académie des Beaux-Arts, to decide what was and was not worthy of being exhibited as fine art.¹² The exhibit of rejections was a success and introduced the public to artists such as Paul Cézanne, Camille Pissarro, and Édouard Manet, who subsequently shaped the artworld in profound ways. The works of art were rejected for a variety of reasons: risqué subject matters, unusual techniques, or both in the case of Manet's *Le déjeuner sur l'herbe* (*The Luncheon on the Grass*), which is

¹² The Emperor wrote that he wished to let the public judge the legitimacy of the Academy's decision: "laisser le public juge de la légitimité de ces réclamations," *Le Moniteur Universel*, April 24, 1863.

perhaps the most famous work of art that was rejected.¹³ The French art critic Théophile Thoré-Bürger attended the exhibition and noted significant features shared among the variety of rejected works. As Juliet Wilson-Bareau summarizes, “Thoré-Bürger wrote perceptively about a quality that he perceived in the wide range of paintings at the Salon des Refusés: the sense of a new beginning in works that rejected mythology, history, and academic insistence on drawing and on finish in favour of modern subjects captured in their most striking, most unified effect; they might appear naïve, exaggerated, even brutal, but they had, Thoré felt, a vigour and sincerity that contrasted with the works in the official Salon.”¹⁴ In general, the rejected artists rejected classical themes and traditional methods to paint common life with new intensity. While shocking, it expressed a new vibrancy. As Dilthey describes the style of this new art: “Painting has returned to color as its fundamental means of expression. It is seeking to do away with all traditional schemata of perception and composition, and to look at the world as though with new eyes” (GS 6: 245 / SW V: 178).

This event is significant for understanding a fundamental shift in the artworld. Saving the rejected works and displaying them to the public demonstrates a schism between works of art on one side and art theory and art criticism on the other side, which speaks to a radically new democratization of art. Moreover, the content and style of the works expressed a new sense of what art can and should express. These painters defied the traditional standards of art maintained by the Académie des Beaux-Arts by emphasizing the basic elements and medium of painting rather than symbolic meaning or ideals. While such expressive styles of painting have become commonplace, in 1863 they were revolutionary. Art historians consider the Salon des Refusés to “represent the most decisive institutional development in the progress of modern art.”¹⁵

Movements in literature, the visual arts, and theater at the end of the nineteenth century expressed the same trend: the rejection of traditional concepts of art. For Dilthey, these new art movements reveal that “a new feeling of reality has shattered the existing forms and rules” and “new forms of art are striving to unfold”

¹³ Art critics found the subject matter of Manet’s *Le déjeuner sur l’herbe* (originally displayed as *Le bain*) perplexing and scandalous. It was not clear who the nude women were or their relationship with the fully clothed men. Additionally, Manet’s technique was considered inconsistent, a “fusion of great ‘old’ art with modernity” that critics did not understand. See Juliet Wilson-Bareau, “The Salon des Refusés of 1863: A New View,” *The Burlington Magazine* 149, no. 1250 (2007): 309–19; d’Arpentigny, “Exposition des Beaux-Arts,” *Le Monde* (13 June 1863), 3.

¹⁴ Wilson-Bareau, “The Salon des Refusés of 1863,” 317. Bürger, “Salon de 1863. IV. *Le Salon des Réprouvés*” *L’Indépendance belge* (11 June 1863).

¹⁵ Albert Boime, “The Salon des Refusés and the Evolution of Modern Art,” *Art Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (1969): 411.

in relation to this reality (GS 6: 104 / SW V: 31). This impulse towards representing the everyday made traditional aesthetic principles irrelevant and overthrew important theoretical distinctions that defined art.

In response to these dramatic changes in the artworld, Dilthey argued that the art critic and theorist must learn “to understand art in relation to its time” (GS 6: 275 / SW V: 210). As the art world continually changes and adopts new forms, aesthetic theory must have a sense of time and place—a sense of history. For Dilthey, “we must replace abstract theorems. . . with ideas acquired from an analysis of the living historical nature of art” (GS 6: 271 / SW V: 206). In appealing to the historical nature of art, Dilthey is not simply invoking art history, although he considers these historical considerations to be important in furthering aesthetic theory (GS 6: 246 / SW V: 179). The task for a new aesthetics must be historical in more than one sense. Aesthetic theory must adopt a more historical approach to address the insufficiencies of timeless principles in traditional approaches and must be able to account for the historicity of art and life. Dilthey acknowledges that there is something timeless in great art but also states that the human is “a historical creature,” which means that when “a new social order has been instituted and the meaning of life has changed, the poets of the preceding epoch no longer move us as they once moved their contemporaries” (GS 6: 241 / SW V: 173). Dilthey breaks from the aesthetic tradition and its tendency to fall into universal principles by addressing art’s relation to everyday life, which is fluid and dynamic, rather than unchanging, and can be understood only within historical and cultural contexts. His aesthetic theory is grounded in life.

Art as an Imaginative Metamorphosis of Everyday Life

Not only is Dilthey’s aesthetic theory grounded in life in terms of its historical context, cultural traditions, and temporal dynamics, but he also based his approach to aesthetics on a descriptive psychology of everyday lived experience. Dilthey’s *Imagination of the Poet*—also referred to as his *Poetics*—outlines how art flows from and transforms everyday lived experience.¹⁶

Dilthey’s account of art is based on his understanding of everyday experience. For Dilthey, there are no fixed elements, no static points of perceptual data. Instead, experience is formed. It is shaped by the influence of feelings, the passing of time, and

¹⁶ Dilthey’s use of “poetics” here refers to a general theory of the arts, not just poetry. For this reason, I will often use “artist” instead of “poet” to convey the broader meaning of poetic imagination that Dilthey describes.

a network of associations that an individual acquires through their life. Experience is continually formed and transformed through a variety of processes. Without attempting to determine the entirety of these processes, an impossible task, Dilthey specifies three formative processes of imaginative metamorphosis: (1) *exclusion*, (2) *intensification or diminution*, and (3) *completion*. These formative processes shape and transform perceptual and representational images (*Bilder*).¹⁷ For Dilthey, these images “interpenetrate one another” and are “equally near and equally far from one another” (GS 6: 141 / SW V: 70). This description serves to distinguish the qualities of our mental content and their interconnections from the external world with its spatial relations and physical causes that can be lawfully determined. For Dilthey, we cannot trace a line of associations or a trajectory of causation from single points of experiential data to the whole of consciousness. Rather, all images are conditioned by the entire network of our psyche—the acquired psychic nexus, which the next section will explain—as well as various processes, acts, interest, stimulation, and complex relations within the content itself. These qualities of our perceptions, as well as the overall nexus of our psyche, prevent abstract or logical simplifications and require a different understanding of the mind. These processes, moreover, are best exemplified by artistic imagination. In Dilthey’s explanation of these three functions of the imagination he articulates the way in which aesthetics relates to everyday experience as a “metamorphosis of reality” (GS 6: 138 / SW V: 67).

The metamorphoses Dilthey describes are not only relevant to art, but also to any mode of reflection on a lived experience. When we reflect on a particular experience, we do not retain it in all its particularity—we transform it through exclusion, intensification or diminution, and completion. We disregard what is accidental or insignificant, we intensify or diminish the emotional aspects, and focus on what is relevant and meaningful. Without these transformations, the particular experience remains confused, obscure, and opaque to our understanding. At the same time, we often do not reflect in our everyday experiences. Our everyday perception is shaped by immediate interests that preoccupy our attention. We think and act according to habitual practices and assumed givens. We experience a multitude of minute and mundane details. The artist reflects upon everyday experience and transforms it. In art, certain elements are excluded deliberately “for clarity and harmony in the constituent of images” (GS 6: 173 / SW V: 102). Not only would it be impossible to write a novel with as many details as lived experience, but it would be

¹⁷ Dilthey does not use the term “image” (*das Bild*) in the narrow sense of visual images but instead in the extended sense that applies to a great variety of mental contents.

overwhelming and difficult to locate what is important. All meaning would get lost in the details. Hence, Dilthey's concept of imaginative metamorphosis includes the notion of exclusion. Exclusion, however, is not enough to create a work of art—mere exclusion can only create “the superficial harmony of an empty ideal if other laws did not also operate in transforming images” (GS 6: 173 / SW V: 102). Images are not merely simplified for the sake of unity in the work of art; they are also *expanded* or *contracted* through the influence of feeling. Dilthey sees all experience as colored by feeling. Feeling can intensify and expand experience or dissipate and contract it. According to Dilthey, the artist is “set apart by a capacity to truly *enliven* images, and the attendant satisfaction gained from perception is *saturated with feeling*” (GS 6: 136 / SW V: 64). Dilthey uses the example of Dickens and other English writers to explain how images can receive a “nervous intensification of reality where things become larger than life. Cliffs become more steep and meadows more lush” (GS 6: 174 / SW V: 103). The artist's use of feeling is an intensification of the everyday.

Yet these processes of exclusion and intensification or diminution do not distinguish art from other experiences. Dilthey attributes similar effects to dreams or states of altered perception in which aspects of reality can fade or become exaggerated. Together exclusion and intensification are insufficient to transform everyday experience in a meaningful way. Dilthey explains, “An imagination which only excludes, intensifies or diminishes, increases or decreases, is feeble and attains only a superficial idealization or caricature of reality” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). For this reason, he introduces the process of *completion*, an imaginative metamorphosis that draws out significant relations. He explains: “Images and their connections are transformed when new components and connections penetrate into their innermost core and thus complete them” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). The process of completion involves relating a particular image to the whole of life. As Dilthey describes, art “restores the totality of lived experience” (GS 6: 177 / SW V: 106).¹⁸ Art has a powerful effect on us because it lays bare our existence. Art does not simply present us with pleasant shapes, charming sounds, or interesting ideas. Art strikes us, captivates us, changes our minds, and pulls at our hearts. For Dilthey, these effects are the result of art's relation to life.

¹⁸ Dilthey's claim here prefigures Gadamer's hermeneutical aesthetics. In *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays* (trans. Nicholas Walker, ed. Robert Bernasconi [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]), Gadamer declares that “in any encounter with art, it is not the particular, but rather the totality of the experienceable world, man's ontological place in it, and above all his finitude before that which transcends him, that is brought to experience” (32–33).

We must note, however, that while the artist can transform experience, they do not create meaning or value from nowhere; meaning is already inherent within life and our everyday experience. To understand how art transforms lived experience through completion requires an understanding of Dilthey's concept of the totality of life, which he explains through his theory of mind in the *acquired psychic nexus*.¹⁹

Lived Experience and the Totality of Life: Dilthey's *Acquired Psychic Nexus*

Dilthey's acquired psychic nexus (*erworbener seelischer Zusammenhang*) describes everyday lived experience as a process of continual transformation that is grounded in concrete historical, cultural contexts. Dilthey proposes the acquired psychic nexus to account for the coherent narrative structure of the psyche that is acquired throughout our lives and that shapes and gives meaning to every lived experience.²⁰ Within lived experience, an impression is neither isolated nor a set of mere associations. Instead, the "immediacy and simplicity of the impression is a psychological illusion. It stands in relation to the dim mass of representations, drives, and feelings of my acquired psychic nexus; it is oriented and conditioned by this nexus" (GS 6: 264 / SW V: 199). Dilthey's nexus describes the relational and historical nature of our existence and thought. Our perception is not a piecing together of sensory data and concepts, but a formative process shaped by the whole of our lived experience. The ideas, feelings, evaluations, and habits we acquire over time shape every perception, representation, evaluation, and act (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). As Makkreel notes, the "term 'acquired' [*erworbener*] indicates that the nexus or structuring of our experience is not abstract and inferred, but concretely 'possessed' through the individual's life history. The nexus is thus a system which is historically acquired and reveals the structural ordering of past experience."²¹ It describes a complex relation between part and wholes that provides the coherence of every lived experience and life as a whole.

Dilthey notes that while the acquired psychic nexus is complex and ever changing, it continually "works as a whole on the representations or states on which

¹⁹ Although Dilthey introduces the acquired psychic nexus in his *Poetics*, it becomes a concept that is central to his descriptive psychology and his broader epistemological projects, such as providing a new ground for the human sciences and revising Immanuel Kant's critique of historical reason. See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (GS 1 / SW I).

²⁰ David Carr discusses the idea of meaning in Dilthey's description of the temporal structure of lived experience as *Zusammenhang*, or coherence, in terms of narrative (*Time, Narrative, and History* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], 61).

²¹ Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 98.

our attention is focused” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The sense of nexus, *Zusammenhang*, expresses the coherence of a plurality of things that *hang together* (*hangen zusammen*) as a unity and express something meaningful through their interrelations. The nexus is a complex interweaving of relations and not simply mental content in the sense of data: “This nexus consists not only of contents, but also of the connections which are established among these contents; these connections are just as real as the contents. The connections are lived and experienced as relations between representational contents, as relations of values to one another, and as relations of ends and means” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The relations of value—ends and means—form a purposive structure that gives coherence to the totality of life. Dilthey emphasizes that this structure is characterized by *immanent subjective purposiveness*, not *objective purposiveness*. Objective purposiveness would involve an external telos or force that determines the individual. Subjective purposiveness is established by inner feeling. Moreover, as *immanent* these connections are not impressed upon the content of experience but are inherent within our experiences. As Jacob Owensby notes, Dilthey’s sense of “purposiveness refers to the manner in which the interrelation of psychic components—instinct, feeling, representation, and volition—promote an increasing articulation of the relation of individuals to their environment for the sake of enhancing or sustaining the value of life.”²² As immanent, this purposiveness is proper to the life of the individual yet relates to the world in which the individual lives. “Dilthey stresses that psychic structure is formed in the interaction of agents with their world. Because individuals are situated in a socio-historical context and the acquired psychic nexus is formed through interaction with the milieu, the acquired nexus at least indirectly reflects the influence of such a context.”²³ As such, the nexus is not limited to pure mental content, private experience, or the isolated Cartesian “I,” but instead expresses the confluence of inner life and external reality: “there is a constant interaction between the self and the milieu of external reality in which the self is placed, and our life consists of this interaction” (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). This constant interaction relates to Dilthey’s notion of life, which is not simply biological but includes the plurality of contexts—social, political, cultural, and historical—that shape the individual. Dilthey’s aesthetic writings always consider artists, poets, and musicians within their social, political, cultural, and historical contexts because he considers the concrete reality of the artist’s lived experience, which is intersubjective and material in nature, to be essential for interpreting works of art and understanding art as an

²² Jacob Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 93.

²³ Owensby, *Dilthey and the Narrative of History*, 95.

expression of life. In this way, Dilthey's account of lived experience avoids the tendency of some approaches to contemporary everyday aesthetics to place the everyday in the individual's private sphere of experience as opposed to the public world. For Dilthey, we must understand them in terms of each other.

The nexus, moreover, as a coherent unity, does not simply provide an abstract framework or general background for experience; it *articulates* experience (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). The nexus articulates our experience by *orienting, bounding, determining,* and *grounding* it (GS 6: 143 / SW V: 72). We act and make decisions based upon the influence of our acquired experiences, ideas, and feelings—they orient us. Our perceptions and evaluations are bound and determined by what we have experienced in the past and what is made accessible to us through our acquired understanding. We find concrete ground for our feelings, thoughts, and actions in terms of who we are as a whole, which means looking at our existence in its historical rootedness and not in terms of definitions and abstract concepts. Dilthey's nexus attempts to account for every aspect of our experiences: "Through [the acquired psychic nexus] principles derive their certainty, concepts receive their sharp delineations, and our position in space and time obtains its orientation. Likewise, it is from this nexus that feelings receive their significance for the totality of our life. Finally, it is because of this same nexus that our will, which is usually occupied with means, remains constantly certain about the system of ends in which the means are grounded. These are the ways in which the acquired psychic nexus works in us, although we possess it obscurely" (GS 6: 143–44 / SW V: 72–73). The acquired psychic nexus expresses the totality of consciousness as a unified complex of interrelations and temporal development. The acquired psychic nexus references the unity of an individual's lived experience and as such provides coherence and the possibility of articulating meaning by connecting particularities to the whole of life. At the same time, *we possess it obscurely*—meaning we cannot grasp it immediately or fully as a determinate and unchanging conceptual framework due to the intricacies of its relations and their transformations over time. In this sense, the coherence of the acquired psychic nexus is distinct from the absolute system of consciousness put forward by Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, and Hegel. Even though Dilthey sees every perception, thought, and feeling as connected in the acquired psychic nexus, we cannot grasp it as a whole. The totality of life provides a general structure in which we can articulate the significance of a particular image, but there is no absolute meaning that can be assigned to it.

The articulative role of the acquired psychic nexus allows us to understand the process of completion and its significance for the aesthetic qualities of everyday life and of art. As explained in the previous section, the processes of exclusion and

intensification are not sufficient for providing meaningful reflection on everyday experience, especially since we can experience such transformations in dreams or fits of strong emotion. It is only through completion—which relates the image to the totality of human experience, the nexus of life—that the transformations of images provide meaning and significance. Just as the acquired psychic nexus orients, determines, and grounds our perception, desire, values, actions, and beliefs by drawing together our representations, will, and feelings as a whole and as established through the course of time, so the significance of a particular transformed image requires reference to the complex network of relations to which it belongs—namely, life as a whole. For Dilthey, “we obtain from images and their connections what is essential about a state of affairs: what gives it its meaning in the nexus of reality” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). It is not enough to simply relate images to each other, as such relations would lack necessity and meaning and appear superficial. The relation to the whole presents us with what is essential about a particular image and its connections to the whole of life. As Dilthey states, “fusion produces mere integration. *Only when the whole acquired psychic nexus becomes active* can images be transformed on the basis of it: *innumerable, immeasurable, almost imperceptible changes* occur in their nucleus. And in this way, the completion of the particular originates from the fullness of psychic life” (GS 6: 175 / SW V: 104). Completion thus requires this relation to the whole of life, to the acquired psychic nexus, in order for its transformation of an image to be essential and meaningful.

The image as it is present within everyday life is already in relation to the whole of life through our acquired experience, although this relation is implicit and indeterminate. The artist transforms these images from everyday life so that they express their relation to the whole more explicitly. As the relation is already implicit in our everyday experience, the artist’s transformation is not imposed or external to the image, but instead reveals the depth and breadth of relations that were already present. This connection to the whole allows the work of art to affect its audience. The shared meaning of human experience resonates with us. Moreover, just as the acquired psychic nexus is not a static structure for experience but formed and transformed through time, so the formation and transformation of images is not a single act. Dilthey describes the work of art as unfolding from its nucleus as if it is alive. The formation of images is “a living process” (GS 6: 176 / SW V: 105).

From these relations between the acquired psychic nexus—which describes the totality of our conscious experience, its processes of formation, and the metamorphosis of life—we can see the intimate relation between everyday life and art in Dilthey’s aesthetics. Dilthey does not separate artistic creation and aesthetic

experience from the processes of our everyday experience; instead, “the *substratum of poetic creativity* was sought in the processes that develop our sphere of experience” (GS 6: 185 / SW V: 115). Art thus bears witness to what is already aesthetic about life by articulating the inner transformations that constitute our experience and thought and drawing out their meaning. The acquired psychic nexus grounds and gives substance to the transformative power of imagination.

Dilthey uses the acquired psychic nexus to explain the dynamics between the artist’s imagination and their lived experience, as well as the individual artist’s style and the larger cultural context and art movements to which they belong. In Dilthey’s *Poetics*, style is both an expression of the artist’s individual lived experience as well as the more general art movements of the time that manifest their socio-historical context. Style expresses art’s transformation of lived experience according to the individual artist. An artist may favor or emphasize one process of imaginative metamorphosis (exclusion, intensification or diminution, and completion) over another, which determines the style of their work (GS 6: 177 / SW V 106). Even in the same art movement, one artist might favor intensification to produce a powerful emotional and psychological tension while another artist might utilize exclusion to create a graceful subtlety. Dilthey describes an individual artist’s style as a habit that is particular to them (GS 6: 176 / SW V 105). Yet we also discuss style in more general terms, especially insofar as a style may be more relevant to certain cultures or time periods than others. Makkreel notes that “Dilthey was sure that his proposed descriptive psychology could do justice not only to the ability of the poet to transform images creatively but also to the historical framework within which the poet must work.”²⁴ Style is particular to the individual artist, yet we also evaluate the place of an artist’s style in broader cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. We can identify an artist’s style as belonging to a circle in a very specific geographical setting, to the tastes and values of society at that time, to a particular art movement in history, or to a certain period’s notion of art. The imaginative metamorphoses that characterize an individual’s tendencies towards certain stylistic transformations also make the transformed image more general, more typical, and thus more expressive of human experience. For Dilthey, style mediates between the limits of historical contingency and the universal import of artistic creation.

Dilthey’s descriptive psychology uses the acquired psychic nexus to articulate the hermeneutic relations between the parts and whole of human experience—

²⁴ Rudolf A. Makkreel, “Toward a Concept of Style: An Interpretation of Wilhelm Dilthey’s Psycho-Historical Account of the Imagination,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 27, no. 2 (1968): 173.

between everyday experiences and the totality of one's life, and between individuals' lives and the broader scope of human life that is expressed in history and culture. Here we can see the strength of Dilthey's account of poetic metamorphosis: the acquired psychic nexus roots the individual in both the concrete particularity of lived experience as well as the larger contexts of social and historical values—and the largest possible context, life as a whole. The acquired psychic nexus provides an account not of isolated subjective experience but of the confluence between the self and world without reducing the concrete particularity of the individual's experience to their context.²⁵

While many of the relational dynamics that Dilthey describes in his aesthetic theory could be considered a contribution to contemporary hermeneutics, he did not present his aesthetics this way. The following section will explain the timeline for his development of hermeneutics, how it intersects with some of his writings on art, and why his general approach to aesthetics should be interpreted through hermeneutics.

Art and the Interpretation of Life

Dilthey did not fully perceive the possible connections between hermeneutics and aesthetics in his own work, although there are glimmers of recognition scattered across his writings. Dilthey's hermeneutical method was still in its early stages of development when he wrote his *Poetics* and *Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics*.²⁶ In his *Poetics*, Dilthey notes that “[h]ermeneutics is also closely related to poetics” and explains that Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher had advanced hermeneutics “to the standpoint of the aesthetic contemplation of form” (GS 6: 124 / SW V: 52). However, Dilthey states that neither poetics nor hermeneutics had progressed very far because their formal analysis approached language as a fixed system rather than a living process (GS 6: 124–25 / SW V 52–53). Dilthey's later hermeneutic writings aim to overcome the limitations he found in Schleiermacher's formalism by connecting hermeneutics to life philosophy and exploring the interpretation of meaning across many different

²⁵ As Charles R. Bambach explains, “Dilthey claimed that it is not the transcendental, transhistorical, and transcultural ‘self’ that experiences historical life but the vital, living, pulsating human being conditioned in its historical place and time” (*Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995], 149).

²⁶ Dilthey wrote *Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics* in 1860 (GS 14 / SW IV), the first volume of the *Life of Schleiermacher* in 1870 (GS 13–14), and *The Rise of Hermeneutics* in 1900 (GS 5 / SW IV); however, he dramatically expanded the range of topics and methods of hermeneutics after 1900 in his *Drafts for a Critique of Historical Reason* (GS 7 / SW III).

manifestations (*Äußerungen*) and expressions (*Ausdrücke*) beyond language—including music, sculpture, painting, gestures, looks, actions, customs, and institutions.²⁷

At the same time, Dilthey's aesthetic writings continually present art as the great interpreter of life—a hermeneutic task in the contemporary sense of hermeneutics. In *Three Epochs of Aesthetics*, Dilthey declares that “the only real artist is one who can advance our ability to interpret reality” (GS 6: 276 / SW V: 211). *Fragments for a Poetics* (1907–1908), Dilthey's unfinished manuscript that was meant to revise his *Poetics*, demonstrates an attempt to redefine his earlier historical-psychological approach with one that is more oriented toward the meaning of art. As the translators explain in a footnote, “Dilthey intended to revise his *Poetics* to replace the subjective language of feeling and pleasure with the object-oriented language of lived experience, value, purpose, and meaning.”²⁸ In this manuscript, Dilthey argues that it is impossible to grasp lived experience in abstract concepts or categories, because life has its own inherent relations and meaning. “Lived experience generates its own expressions” (GS 6: 319 / SW V: 229). Throughout his aesthetic writings, Dilthey emphasizes that life requires interpretation and art helps us access its meaning.

Situating Dilthey's aesthetics within his life philosophy further draws out its hermeneutic dimensions because of the way he describes our relation to life.²⁹ For Dilthey, we are immersed in life and cannot extricate ourselves to look at it from the outside. Life has its own meaningfulness. In “Life and Cognition” (1892–1893), Dilthey explains that the “expression ‘life’ formulates what is most familiar and most intimate to everyone, yet at the same time something most obscure, indeed totally inscrutable. What life is remains an insoluble riddle. All reflection, inquiry, and thought arise from this inscrutable [source]. All cognition is rooted in this never fully cognizable [ground]” (GS 19: 346 / SW II: 72).³⁰ What is closest to us—life—is furthest from our understanding. As Dilthey puts it, *das Leben legt sich aus* (GS 19: 345 / SW II: 70), which Theodore Kisiel interprets as “Life lays itself out, it articulates itself,

²⁷ See Michael N. Forster, “Dilthey's Importance for Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Dilthey: Critical Essays*, ed. Eric S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 61–81.

²⁸ Footnote in Dilthey, “Fragments for a Poetics” in SW V: 228. Dilthey critiques his earlier psychological approach when he states that the “[gathering together and completing of lived experience] is more basic and more natural than the move to psychology. Lived experience obtains an expression, which represents it in its fullness: It brings out something new. It neither utilizes nor in any way requires psychological concepts” (GS 6: 317 / SW V: 228).

²⁹ See Jos de Mul, *The Tragedy of Finitude: Dilthey's Hermeneutics of Life*, trans. Tony Burret (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004); Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969), especially 118–21.

³⁰ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Understanding the Human World* (SW II); *Grundlegung der Wissenschaften vom Menschen, der Gesellschaft und der Geschichte* (GS 19).

it interprets itself.”³¹ This means that life must be interpreted from out of itself, rather than by applying concepts from the outside. Interpreting life from life itself is a hermeneutical task. Dilthey paints life as an “insoluble riddle” that resists clear and distinct concepts—the traditional philosophical methods that presuppose humans are a *res cogitans* that stands apart from the world as a detached spectator. Since we are wrapped up in the very thing we want to examine, we cannot understand it through abstract concepts or principles.³²

Yet Dilthey thinks that life can be described. He explains that life’s “particular characteristic traits can be set in relief. One can trace, as it were, the accents and rhythms of the melody it arouses, but life cannot be analyzed into its factors. It is unanalyzable” (GS 19: 346 / SW II: 72). For Dilthey, reflecting on and understanding life in its depth will not lead to a definite meaning, but instead a sense of life (*Sinn des Lebens*).³³ We cannot pin down life with determined ideas or frameworks and instead must trace its contours like music. While music is a metaphor here, Dilthey frequently turns to artistic expression to understand life.³⁴ Art has a special role in the interpretation of life from life itself.

Throughout his aesthetic writings, Dilthey emphasizes the ability of the artist to interpret life and find expression for its meaning. Art makes life more tangible, more deeply felt, and more meaningful. As Richard Unger notes, “It is Dilthey’s premise that our fundamental experience of life is communicated most immediately and thus most accurately through art and especially poetry.”³⁵ Art has this power, moreover, because it cannot be reduced to concepts, ideas, or propositions. In his *Poetics*, Dilthey explains that a work of art “always contains more than can be expressed in a general proposition, and its gripping force comes from this surplus” (GS 6: 206 / SW V: 137). A work of art is never reducible to one impression or one interpretation. Like a lived experience, it has a surplus of meaning.³⁶ Dilthey states that “the lived experience of

³¹ Theodore Kisiel, “On the Genesis of Heidegger’s Formally Indicative Hermeneutics of Facticity,” in *Rethinking Facticity*, ed. François Raffoul and Eric Sean Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 43.

³² Heidegger echoes this very dynamic and explicitly describes it as a hermeneutic circle in *Being and Time*.

³³ Makkreel, *Dilthey*, 377.

³⁴ For an explanation of music’s ability to express the rhythm of life, see Michael Batz, *Der Rhythmus des Lebens: Zur Rolle der Musik im Werk Wilhelm Diltheys* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011).

³⁵ Richard Unger, *Friedrich Hölderlin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984), 128.

³⁶ For a longer account of why excessive meaning is important to hermeneutical aesthetics, see Catherine Homan, *A Hermeneutics of Poetic Education: The Play of the In-Between* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

the poet and its unnerving symbols constitute a dramatic core that cannot be expressed in any proposition. . . everything comes together into a graphic, felt unity of the deepest life-experiences, and that is precisely the significance of poetry” (GS 6: 208 / SW V: 139). Like life, art must be experienced. For Dilthey, art has the same relational dynamics as life itself.³⁷

Conclusion

Dilthey’s desire to ground aesthetic theory in historical and cultural contexts, the relational dynamics in his descriptive psychology, his revision of Schleiermacher’s hermeneutics to include nonlinguistic expressions like music and the visual arts, and his understanding of art as a way of interpreting life from life itself all illustrate how his aesthetic theory can be read through contemporary hermeneutical aesthetics. Dilthey’s concept of poetic metamorphosis relies upon relating particulars to the whole of life, and yet individual lived experience remains significant and meaningful in and of itself. Art moves us because of its relation to our everyday lived experiences and to life as a whole. Thus, understanding art requires that we continually move from particulars to universals and back again. Dilthey’s descriptive psychology allows this possibility through the acquired psychic nexus, which articulates the hermeneutic dynamics that shape every aspect of lived experience. The acquired psychic nexus describes the individual’s life as a whole, while remaining grounded in singular life events, as well as the social, cultural, and historical contexts to which the individual belongs.

Like Heidegger, Gadamer, Eugene Fink, Paul Ricœur, and other figures in twentieth-century hermeneutics, for Dilthey the work of art opens a hermeneutic circle that speaks to our lives and human existence in general. In this way, Dilthey’s aesthetics can contribute to contemporary hermeneutics in terms of his articulation of the complex, paradoxical dynamics involved in the interpretation of everyday life.

³⁷ I give a more thorough account of this aspect of art in Longtin, “From Factual Life to Art.” See also Giovanni Matteucci, *Dilthey: Das Ästhetische als Relation* (Würzburg, Germany: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004).