

Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo"

Concerning the encounter with a work of art

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A b s t r a c t

What happens when in the midst of the routines of our workaday world when we suddenly find ourselves in the presence of someone who regards us with intensity and demands our response? Rilke's poem explores that precise and pregnant moment when an object of scientific investigation, aesthetic contemplation or historical analysis suddenly breaks free from the constraints imposed upon it by a workaday perspective and transforms itself *into a subject who beckons us to enter another world*. Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" leads us beyond our mundane and naturalistic concerns, beyond a thinking and doing that seeks to appropriate and masters a natural world. To faithfully follow its meandering thought means to be led to the very source from which springs narration and metaphor. It is from this same source that springs a human world.

Introduction

In two previous essays we described how our perception of our world changes when we move from a workaday to a festive world (Jager, B. 1996 and 1997). We showed there how a *workaday attitude* prepares us to accomplish everyday practical tasks and makes possible a natural scientific and technological understanding of our world.

We showed at the same time how a radically different *festive attitude* opens us to a world of reciprocal relations between hosts and guests. It is this festive attitude that gives access to a world in which it is possible to create families, to establish friendships and to enter into neighborly and companionable associations of all types. This festive world of intersubjective relations forms the very foundation of civic institutions, of neighborhoods, villages, cities and civilizations.

It is within this festive world devoted to the cultivation of intersubjective relations that perception, thought and feeling no longer

appear as intrinsic aspects of a material and intellectual conquest of a natural universe. Our seeing, hearing, feeling and thinking all show themselves within their foundational aspect as forming part of a festive gift exchange that establishes intersubjective relations and that thereby *founds* a human world.

We explored these very different but complimentary mundane and festive attitudes by means of a thought experiment. In this experiment we followed in our imagination the train of thought and actions of a field geologist who in the course of his scientific exploration of a remote corner of the world discovers a human grave. We wanted to understand the transformation of the geologist's world as he interrupted his scientific work in order to visit and pay his respects to the grave. We understood the geologist's scientific work as belonging to the sphere of the workaday world and to that specific realm of life where we seek to better understand and control our natural environment. By contrast, we understood the geologist's visit to the grave as belonging to that more fundamental sphere of life where we initiate, cultivate and maintain interpersonal relations.

At the moment of transition between a workaday world and a festive sphere of life the geologist might have wondered about the changes that took place in his manner of perceiving and understanding his surrounding world. He might have asked himself how it might be possible that the "same" stones that at one moment had presented themselves as integral parts of a natural universe could the next moment appear as forming part of a human grave. How could the "same" stones inform him one moment about a natural universe and the next moment raise questions about a particular human life and a particular human death? How could the "same" stones serve one moment as a window upon the natural universe and the next moment make their appearance as a doorway that gives access to the house of a neighbor?

In thinking about these mysterious transformations of objects and these miraculous mutations of consciousness our geologist would eventually seek a way to reconcile his natural scientific understanding of the world with his poetic, religious and mythical understanding of human relationships. He would eventually have to reconcile what he learned from his natural scientific explorations with what he learned from his graveside meditations.

At that point the geologist could choose different paths of thinking. As a typical modern man his first impulse would most likely be one of trying to avoid the task of reconciliation by denying any essential difference between a workaday and a festive world, or between a natural scientific and a poetic or religious mode of understanding his world. He could deny the specific festive character of his graveside visit

or the specific mundane and workaday character of his scientific explorations. He could claim that poetry was but an imprecise way of experiencing what in the end would be the task of the natural sciences to make clear and explicit. But by choosing this path of thinking he would ultimately confine his thoughts and feelings and his very being to the prison house of a materialist universe where there is no room for graves and no place for graveside meditations.

Alternatively he could seek refuge in an idealist utopia where there is place for neither daily tasks nor festive encounters. But in either case he would have avoided the most fundamental task of contemplating the miracle of transcendence. It is this miracle that transported him from the sphere of mundane tasks to a different one where he could encounter another person, and from a way of thinking and perceiving appropriate to geology to a way of being with others appropriate to graveside meditations.

By avoiding this central task our geologist would fail to grasp the importance of transcendence in his life and condemn himself to a futile struggle to inhabit an outside detached from an inside or an inside detached from an outside. Eventually he would discover that by overlooking the miracle of transcendence he would neglect the very foundation of his world. In the end he would lose access to both geological explorations and graveside meditations and bereave himself of both poetry and science.

But he could also choose a different path that begins with the acknowledgement of the fundamental differences between a mundane and a festive world. In choosing it the geologist would inevitably confront the strange transcendence in life that transports us from a workaday world to one of festive encounters. He would come to think of his world not as something ultimately held together by natural laws and material forces but as a metaphoric whole whose sense remains rooted in his own creative ability to link together incommensurate parts. In the end he would come to recognize the power of metaphor as an ontological dimension that enabled him to inhabit the earth.

The geologist would recognize the power of metaphor, not just in clever wordplay or in his imagination but in his own ability to cross a neighbor's thresholds and to creatively link together workdays and feast days. He would discover in his ability to link past and present to future events. He would recognize it in his ability to link together here and yonder, heaven and earth, man and woman, infancy, childhood and adulthood. He would exercise it in creating a human world that makes place for human and divine being, for the living and the dead, for an animal way of being and human being. He would discover the covenant that binds neighbor to neighbor and mortal to immortal being. He would find this covenant embodied in the threshold that

permits those who learn to cross it to understand one another and to dwell together in a common world.

To contemplate that covenant means to stand before the miracle that permits us to move across a threshold from the past to the present and the future. It is this threshold that grants us a childhood that is never completely separated from adulthood and old age. It is what permits us to inhabit a distinct domain circumscribed by time and space without losing touch with the domains and realms inhabited by others.

In what follows we will read Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo" as an ode to this miracle of transcendence that marks us as distinctly human.

The poem describes with preternatural clarity the unique and miraculous moment when an ordinary, quotidian, task-oriented world gives way to a festive one and when a first global and generic appreciation of an artwork suddenly makes place for a festive, particular and intimate encounter.

We may assume that the poet first approached the torso of Apollo as a knowledgeable connoisseur of antique art. From that standpoint he may have eagerly explored various interesting, hitherto unnoticed details of the torso in order to come to a better understanding of a particular work of art, or of a historical period or an artistic tradition. This first relationship to the work would have been that of a student of art history who confronts a carefully placed and studiously catalogued cultural artifact as an object of study in an effort to gather more extensive and reliable information about a particular work, historical period, style or school.

But in the course of these investigative labors the poet's relationship to the artwork undergoes a sudden and dramatic transformation. Before his astonished eyes he sees the object of his study transform itself into the luminous body of a god, who then addresses him and urges him to change his life. It is in this way that the poem confronts the reader with the mystery of thresholds and with the miraculous transformations that occur when a quotidian, task-filled world gives way to a festive one and when we are suddenly brought face to face with ourselves and with our neighbors.

I will first present the poem in Rilke's original German and then add my own English translation:

Archaischer Torso Apollos

Wir kannten nicht sein unerhörtes Haupt,
darin die Augenäpfeln reiften. Aber
sein Torso glüht noch wie ein Kandelaber,
in dem sein Schauen, nur zurückgeschraubt,
sich hält und glänzt. Sonst konnte nicht der Bug
der Brust dich blenden, und im leisen Drehen
der Lenden könnte nicht ein Lächeln gehen
zur jener Mitte, die die Zeugung trug.

Sonst stunde dieser Stein entstellt und kurz
unter der Schultern durchsichtigem Sturz
und flimmerte nicht so wie Raubtierfelle

und bräche nicht aus allen seinen Rändern
aus wie ein Stern: denn da ist keine Stelle,
die dich nicht sieht. Du musst dein Leben ändern.

(Rilke, R.M. (1959) *Der ausgewählten Gedichte, erster Teil.*
Wiesbaden: Insel Verlag)

Archaic Torso of Apollo

We will never know his astounding head
Where the apples of his eyes ripened. Yet
The power of his glance abides, attenuated, in the torso
Which glows golden like candelabra.
How else could we be so blinded by the curvature of his chest
Or be drawn in by the smile that spreads from the
Gently turning hips to the middle
That bore the mark of his sex.

Without it this stone would stand disfigured and cut short
Beneath the panoply of these shoulders
And could not shimmer like the skin of a panther or a cat.
Nor burst beyond its confines like a shining star:
Because there is no place that does not see you.
You must alter your life
(Translated by the author)

As I suggested above, we might imagine that the poet took first note of the torso as part of a particular collection of antique art. His initial approach might well have been that of a knowledgeable student of an art in the process of improving his understanding of a particular trend, school or period in the history of art or the humanities. Had he been inspired to write about the torso from that perspective he would not have written a poem but composed an aesthetic, sociological or historical monograph about the artwork in question. The particular perspective of that monograph would in most respects resemble the one assumed by the geologist as he studied and described a geological landscape.

The inspiration to write the Archaic Torso of Apollo grew clearly out of a very different attitude. Every part of the poem speaks of a very personal and festive encounter with an individual work of art. It is this personal encounter with the work that forms the true subject matter of the poem and that leads the poet to reflect on that mysterious moment when a merely quotidian attitude of ordering and surveying gives way to a memorable, festive and intersubjective exchange. It is at this turning point that the natural or cultural objects of our daily world break beyond the limits imposed on them by our mundane habits and begin to assert a festive individuality. It is at this moment, so tells us the poem, that objects begin to "burst beyond their confines like a star". They suspend the convictions and certitudes of daily life by pointing beyond themselves towards other worlds. Their freshness and their newfound individuality draw us irresistibly into a festive world where we discover self and other. Without this moment of mysterious transformation the torso of Apollo would have remained confined within the limits imposed upon it as a catalogued museum piece and as a splendid example of art of a certain time and place. It would have remained an interesting object of cultural study, yet confined to that role the torso would have been diminished and would have stood forever: "disfigured and cut short beneath the panoply of these shoulders."

One possible way of reading the poem is to understand it as exploring that precise moment when an object of aesthetic study or historical analysis suddenly breaks free from the constraint imposed upon it by our quotidian explorations. It describes that particular moment of astonishment that occurs when we see an object or a person suddenly break out of the monotony of our daily activities to show us glimpses of *another world*. It is in this way that the Greek torso pulls the poet out of the slumber of his tasks and beckons him like a host to cross a threshold and to step into the revealing light of a festive encounter.

In answering this call and by entering this hospitable realm the poet suspends his habitual, everyday assumptions about the differences between objects and subjects. Within the world of our everyday routines we know with absolute and pragmatic certainty that a piece of bronze or marble cannot beckon or invite us, no matter how artfully it may imitate the traits of a living human body. Within that practical sphere of life we know for sure that material objects cannot see or hear us, that they cannot invite or repel us, or confront us with personal questions. Within that domain we remain convinced that the beauty and attractiveness of natural or cultural objects are but the result of our own projections. Within that domain we know for sure that beauty is inescapably a one-sided and individual affair that begins and ends with the eye of the beholder.

This same attitude also convinces us that the only sure and proper way to understand an object is to master it intellectually or materially in the course of our daily activities. Within that sphere, art objects are of interest only for what they reveal about the tastes and skills or states of mind of artists or their patrons. They are sources of information about the interests, preoccupations, techniques and materials available in a certain historical periods or geographic area. Within that sphere of life cultural objects arouse our interest chiefly for what they can reveal about schools and markets, cultural influences, aesthetic beliefs and historical or material circumstances. They serve as tools for the propagation of particular ideologies, or for the advancement of academic careers, or they offer opportunities for sound financial investments. But approached exclusively from that perspective artworks lose their soul and their identity as works of art. Left abandoned to a quotidian world they begin to resemble the useful objects and instruments that surround them in that world. Detached from the sphere of festive encounters artworks lose their soul and their vitality. They gradually lose their capacity to point beyond the workaday world and thereby lose their reason for being.

Artworks share with human beings the vital characteristic of being able to enter into revealing intersubjective relationships. They share with persons the ability to pull us out of the world of our daily cares into a

world of festive encounters. It is part of the excitement of artworks that they remain at any time subject to sudden transformations from interesting artifacts to individual subjects. As such they may, at any time, break free from the place and time assigned to them by a mundane order and by quotidian concerns. They can throw off the docile garments of ideological, historical or financial interests to become our virtual partners in a luminous revelation of a human world that is always larger than the quotidian categories we impose upon it.

The poet marvels at this transformation and wonders how it could be that a damaged piece of sculpture, belonging to a distant and very imperfectly understood civilization, could nevertheless find its way to our contemporary heart and mind and move us so deeply. How is it possible that a headless torso of a foreign god can look upon us with such fierce eyes and, as the last line of the poem attests, make us want to *change our life*?

“We will never know his astounding head”

The poet becomes aware of the god through his steady and penetrating gaze. Rilke's German speaks of this gazing as “*schauen*”, which we might hastily translate as “looking” or “observing”. Yet, to translate it thus obscures an important etymological nuance that links Apollo's *schauen* to the English “showing”. Apollo's seeing and observing is also a manner of “showing”, and it is this element of reciprocity that lifts Apollo's out of the workaday world of observing and inspecting and that evokes a festive world of mutual revelations.

The poem tells us that the unsettling, penetrating glance of the god cannot be traced back to a literal or material head or even to eyes that we might recognize as such in daily life. The gaze of the god emanates from the entire surface of the sculpted body. The torso regards the poet with a face and with eyes that are no longer present in the material, workaday world. Its “*schauen*”, its seeing and showing, takes the form of a light that illuminates the festive world that the poet is invited to enter. The god is present, but the poet will never know the god's “astounding head”. He will undergo the full impact of that presence, not by looking for an absent head or for literal eyes but through a response to the divine invitation to enter the sacred precinct. To do this the poet must temporarily set aside the quotidian tasks of collecting interesting historical facts and constructing plausible theories about provenance and stylistic peculiarities. To enter the realm of the sculpture he must change directions and open himself to a personal encounter with the god.

Had the poet not answered the invitation, had he remained enclosed within the confines of a quotidian world, he would have experienced Apollo's glance as a most unwelcome intrusion into his life. We tend to feel uncomfortable or threatened when in the course of our daily activities we become aware of being watched or spied upon.

This experience of a menacing intrusion into the ordered world of our daily activities stands in sharp contrast to the experience of the poet, who feels quickened and welcomed by Apollo's distant glance. He does not seek to shield or protect himself from the glance but permits it to shed a new light upon his world.

To feel secretly observed in the midst of one's daily activities means to be forcibly drawn into a hostile domain of alien purposes and principles. It means to have to defend one's own perspective from the totalizing perspective of another. The glance of the other is welcome only within a world of reciprocity that is protected by thresholds and governed by the laws of hospitality. It is for this reason that Apollo's glance can bring enlightenment only within a world of festive encounters. Only a festive world provides the proper setting in which Apollo's showing and shining could inspire the poet to see his own life in a new light. And only a festive world could give birth to a poem that would itself become a new domain visited by the reader and the writer and inhabited by the god.

"Where the apples of his eyes ripened"

How did this Apollo's glance, this evocative and revealing presence, come to inhabit the torso? How did it transform a mere piece of stone into the domain of a god? How did the life-giving radiance of this look come to inhabit the marble body and shed its light upon the world? The text tells us that the eyes of the god "ripened" like apples on a tree. We should think of this "ripening" as an integral part of a festive exchange between heaven and earth. The bounty of light and rain coming down from heaven evokes an earthly response in the form an upward thrust of grass and grain, an opening of flowers and a ripening of fruit. The light of the sun functions here as the opening line in a play or as a first phrase that initiates a conversation. The poetic imagination makes here no reference to the workaday metaphors of material causes and effects and guides our thought instead in the direction of hospitable exchanges between hosts and guests. Within that view the torso itself comes into being within an active exchange between heaven and earth. It is here that "the apples of his eyes ripened", that the marble became inhabited by the divine glance and that the poem about the torso became inhabited by the spirit of the god.

The eyes of Apollo are not natural or material things. They do not form part of the quotidian world of objects that can be touched and queried, used and belabored. The gaze of Apollo inexorably leads us away from a world where all things are destined to be mastered, used and consumed. That gaze draws us unavoidably towards a world of festive disclosure.

Most modern European languages make some reference to a metaphoric link between the idea of apples and of eyes. The German "*Augapfel*" combines the two ideas that literally refers to the eyeball and that metaphorically evokes the "apple of one's eye". This evocation opens the sphere of fond interpersonal relations where parents look with pride and pleasure upon their offspring, and where the sun and the sky look down with benevolent eyes upon the verdant earth below.

The Apollinian gaze weaves a radically intersubjective world together in which each part acknowledges and responds to every other part, and where cohesion and unity is achieved by means of ceremonial exchanges of gifts. The beaming light of the Apollo's gaze is not one that blurs distinctions or that builds a human world by an indiscriminate mixing and mingling of its separate parts. Quite to the contrary, it creates harmony and unity by sharpening the contours of each separate person or thing, while at the same time gathering them together within a cohesive and festive embrace.

A person enters this hospitable sphere by appearing on the doorsteps of the host and announcing his name and asking to see the host. No one can enter this sphere without revealing the self and without asking for the revelation of the other. No single thing or person can enter this world without at the same time entering into a festive display of self and other and without participating in a gift exchange and a conversational give and take that lays the foundation of a human world.

**"Yet the power of his glance abides, attenuated, in the torso
Which glows like a candelabrum."**

The full force of Apollo's presence has been tempered to fit the contours of an intimate encounter with the god. The poet does not face the god, as he may have appeared on Olympus in his undiminished splendor in the company of the other deities. The torso presents the god in an attenuated and truncated form.

It is clear that the god inhabits the torso and the divine glance illuminating the room is that of Apollo. Yet the power of the divine glance has been dimmed to conform it to the dimensions of a merely

mortal world. If the full force of the original glance evokes the image of the sun, the light that emanates from the torso reminds the poet rather of turned-down lamplight or the glow of candles. He writes that the bright light of Apollo's eyes has been "*zurückgeschraubt*" or "pegged down". The German word combines the idea of a "going back" or "going down" (*zurück*) with that of the "turning of a screw" (*schrauben*). The image evoked by this metaphor is that of a lantern with a wick that can be raised and lowered by turning the lantern wheel.

This tempering or lowering of the lights does not deprive the poet of the full presence of the god. On the contrary, it is precisely this tempering and lowering that makes the divine encounter possible. The poet does not complain about the absence of light in the same sense that he does not regret the absence of any direct reference to the head, the hands or the feet of the god.

A torso represents the denuded trunk of a body and thereby draws our attention to what upholds and supports it. It shows us a staff that upholds a body and makes visible a ground that only indirectly points to what it supports. A torso represents by pointing beyond itself in the direction of what must necessarily remain unseen, unheard and left understood.

The wisdom of the torso and of the tempered light of its glance lies therefore in its manner of revealing that what cannot be seen. It points to an absence that is a pre-condition for a presence and to an ignorance that is a pre-condition for our understanding. Within the festive sphere all things and persons reveal themselves in this manner. The poem shows us how it is precisely the divine body's incompleteness and the muted light of its gaze that draws the poet into the presence of the god and makes possible the divine encounter.

We are reminded here of the Greek myth about the birth of Dionysus. It tells how Selene, the mother of the god, was destroyed by a foolish request she made of her lover Zeus. It occurred just prior to the birth of their son when Zeus in gratitude offered to grant the mother any wish she might have. She requested that he appear before her, not in his earthly human form as a handsome lover, but in his undiminished glory as an Olympian god. At the very instant Zeus revealed himself in his full Olympian splendor Selene was literally consumed by the brilliance of the sight. Zeus was just barely able to extract Dionysus from her womb before she was reduced to ashes, and in this manner he bestowed life twice upon the god of wine and theater.

It was no doubt Selene's immoderate desire to witness the whole of heaven and earth that brought on her unfortunate fate. This same immoderate desire for a complete and unmediated revelation of self

and other, of heaven and earth, forever haunts the Dionysian world and threatens to foreclose its revelations. It is for this reason that the Dionysian world prospers best when it remains linked to the domain of Apollo which imposes limits and installs thresholds wherever it asserts itself.

There remains something paradoxical about a torso being able to render the god fully present and about a tempered light that can do ultimate justice to the full splendor of the god. It is even more mysterious that this presence and this splendor can be experienced only by those who have accepted the truncated condition of human existence and who have surrendered their claims to omnipotence and omniscience and foresworn all right to an absolute access to the other. We gain access to a festive world of revelation only by entering into a covenant and crossing a threshold and entering a domain where self and other are revealed

In accepting this condition and in making this sacrifice we step over a threshold and enter a fully human intersubjective world where it is possible to reveal self and other in the tempered light of hospitality and in the truncated images of art and poetry.

**“How else could we be so blinded by the curvature of his chest
Or be drawn in by the smile that spreads from the
Gently turning hips to the middle
That bore the mark of his sex.”**

Rilke's German refers to "*der Bug*", or to "the bow" of the torso's chest, seeking to express the graceful bend or curvature of the divine body. The word also evokes the famous bow of Apollo, its deadly aim and its mighty forward thrust. The Homeric Hymns describe the god as "Lord of the silver bow" and as the "farshooting Apollo". At the same time the word evokes the rounded bow of a ship as it pushes forward and onward through the waves. The German "Brust", like the English "breast" or "chest" points to the seat of feeling, sentiment or character. The bow-like curvature expresses the god's initiative, his compressed courage and forthrightness and his far-reaching aims. Apollo's presence does not remain at a safe distance from the human world. He comes upon those he targets like an arrow shot from a bow or like the bow of a ship cleaving the waves to reach the shore. The poet is blinded by this curvature and is briefly overwhelmed by the forward thrust of the divine initiative. He experiences it like the blinding light of the sun, or, as he expresses it a few lines later, as the light of a brilliant star "bursting beyond its confines" and filling the sky.

The poet describes the presence of the god in terms of a wide range of light metaphors. He thinks of the glow of candles and of a low burning oil lamp, he is reminded of the shine of apples and of bright eyes, of the shimmer of fur, of the blinding light of the sun or of a bright lone star in the sky. He becomes aware of the god not as an image, or as one visual object among many others, but as a mysterious source of light that illuminates him and his surrounding world. He does not so much see the god as he sees his world revealed in the light of the god. He enters a cosmos that derives its unity and coherence from Apollo's "seeing and showing". It is this luminous regard that sets a dynamic interplay in motion between a host and a guest, between heaven and earth and between self and other.

To place oneself into a right relationship to a source of light remains a delicate affair, demanding sound judgement and a proper sense of decorum and distance. Coming too close to a source of light can overwhelm and blind us. Staying too far removed from it may deprive us of the full power it has to reveal a world. We read that the poet is "blinded" by the curvature of the chest; he appears in danger of approaching the bow of Apollo too closely and of venturing too near the place where the god takes his aim, draws his bow or plucks the strings of his lyre. But in the next line the poet becomes aware of the more intimate light of a smile, and of the music of soft laughter. At the same time he becomes aware of a gentle movement that, like that of a smile, alights from the hips of the torso and then broadens outward towards the groin where it stirs the mysteries of sex and procreation.

The turning of the hips evokes the mysteries of sexual intercourse, but it also elicits thoughts about the marvels of human locomotion and of the subtle interplay between a right and a left side of the body. It is this interplay that lays the foundation for all others and it can be thought of as the axis around which a human world devolves. It is what makes sitting, standing and walking possible. It is what enables us to assume a stance, to take an initiative, to turn towards and away from others. This primordial dialogue between a right side and a left side of the body constitutes a foundation upon which rests all subsequent forms of intersubjective interactions.

The moving hips certainly hint unmistakably at the act of making love. We read of a smile that spreads from the hips to "the middle that bore the mark of his sex". In this instance too the torso draws our attention to something that is no longer present in a literal or material sense. The poem uses the past tense to refer to a masculine sex (*die Zeugung*) that is no longer fully represented. We may assume that the virile force of the god still lingers in the vicinity of the torso, and still forms part of it, as does the powerful "*schauen*" of the god. We are again confronted by the paradox of a headless torso that overwhelms

us by its presence and by a mutilated sculpture that still exudes the virile power of an absent sex.

We touch in this instance upon the very heart of the poem. We are reminded that we inhabit a cosmos that does not derive its ultimate coherence and meaning from the literal and material presence of natural objects or forces, or even from the natural laws and material processes that govern their relations. The ultimate coherence of that world derives from a covenant between neighbors and from a metaphoric commerce between heaven and earth. The coherence of a human world derives from symbols that, like the torso, forever point beyond themselves towards their completion. The poem teaches that the most perfect kind of wholeness and completeness to which human beings may aspire is embodied in the torso and in the poem. Both the body divine and the human body show themselves in their most complete and ultimate form as mere torsos whose broken limbs continue to point mysteriously to an anterior or future wholeness beyond word and image. By a strange alchemy of the poetic imagination the archaic torso of Apollo begins to presage certain features of the crucified Christ.

The poet's use of the term "*die Zeugung*" for the organs of sex makes reference, not just to an anatomically considered body or to sexual reproduction understood from a naturalistic standpoint. It makes reference not merely to a biological, but also to a moral fatherhood. That reference becomes more pronounced when we place the torso and its allusion to sex within the cultural context proper to the archaic torso. We then note that the common Greek name for the human organs of sex (*tà aidōia*) referred to "things of awe or shame". The verb-form *aidesthai* means to feel respect, awe, and reverence. The sense of shame attached to the genitalia was in this instance not merely a natural expression of a person's vulnerability in the sight of his own or another's desire. The related noun "*aidos*" refers to a pivotal moral and religious idea in Greek cultural and religious life that is only partially translated by such words as "shame", "honor", "respect" or "reverence". A poignant scene in Homer's Iliad illustrates the close relationship between "*aidos*" as a pivotal moral idea and the *aidōia* understood as genitalia or "things of shame". It occurs when Hector steps outside the walls of Troy to confront the great Achilles in a single combat that will spell his doom. His mother, Queen Hecuba, fears the outcome of the duel and she tries in vain to persuade him to withdraw inside the protective walls of the city. In her despair to draw him back from the abyss she bears her breasts in public and calls out to him to look upon her and to feel *aidos*. She thus reminds him of the sacred bond that binds a son to his mother and that obliges him to take account of her pleas. She points to her naked breasts and says: "Hector, my son, before this feel *aidos* and take pity on me, if ever I

gave you the comforting breasts. Remember it, dear son, and defend us against the enemy by staying inside the walls.”

Whatever evokes *aidos* evokes a sacred limit that all at once separates and binds together one individual to another. It regulates a mortal’s relationship to the gods, a child’s relationship to the parents, a husband’s to his wife, a citizen to his neighbors. It is a limit that holds heaven and earth together and that protects the integrity of families, neighborhoods and cities.

If we follow the logic of a poetic thought that links *aidoion* to *aidos* we come to think of the “shame-provoking” parts of the human body as sacred thresholds that inspire thoughts and feelings of awe, respect and honor. Within this context the mark of Apollo’s sex evokes a myth of origins and points to the mysterious and creative limits that demands to be honored by proper ceremony, and to be protected by sound judgement and social tact.

**“Without it this stone would stand disfigured and cut short
Beneath the panoply of its shoulders
And could not shimmer like the skin of a panther or a cat
Nor burst beyond its confines like a shining star.”**

Thus far the main concern of the poem has been that of drawing closer to the mysterious light emanating from the torso. It is the particular quality of this light that guides the poet past the mere stone of the sculpture and the mere sound of the words of his poem to an encounter with the god. This light cannot be fully appreciated from an ordinary, day to day perspective; it does not register on spectrosopes and stands outside the warp and woof of natural science. What then is the nature of this light and how can one be guided by it? It is at this point that the poet begins to elaborate what we may call a cryptic and poetic cosmology. It maintains that in the beginning there was the light of Apollo’s eyes and the force of his *Schauen*, understood here, all at once, as a seeing, observing, showing and telling. It is this particular light that brings a world into being in which it is possible to be fascinated by a story, to be moved by a line of poetry or inspired by the purity and beauty of a simple gesture. The original source of this revealing light is the head of Apollo. The head itself is no longer visible but the power of its glance abides in the world it brings into view. In this world art and poetry make their appearance as particular things that reflect the light of the divine glance and that have become endowed with the power to point beyond themselves and to reveal a coherent human and divine world.

“Because there is no place that does not see you”

The poet has fully entered the luminous world of Apollo. He has left behind the daily world of mere routines where it is possible to hide from the faces of others and has entered a world of festive encounters. It is at this moment that he realizes that there is “no place that does not see you”, that there is no place left to hide and that every corner of his existence is being illuminated by the divine presence.

To enter a world of festive revelation implies a transformation of all human activities. In the workaday world we are in the habit of dealing with merely useful or material things and circumstances that we carefully observe and comprehend but that do not observe or comprehend us in turn. Within that realm our seeing becomes detached from our being seen. But within the festive enclave of encounter this division becomes undone so that our seeing the other person can no longer be effectively separated from ourselves being seen by the one we observe. Within the realm of the festive all observing of the other remains linked to a showing of oneself, and our desire to know and understand the other cannot be strictly separated from our desire to be known and understood.

The poet has ceased to scrutinize an alien world and has entered into the festive world of reciprocity. As he steps across the threshold from an anonymous functional world into the full light of Apollo's presence, he is at first overwhelmed when he finds himself becoming the subject of an ardent inquiry. He is momentarily blinded by the light streaming towards him and at that point that he must decide whether to hide and leave the scene or step forward and present himself at the threshold. His own being is questioned as he is asked where he comes from, where he is going and what he seeks. He cannot avoid these questions so long as he stands in the revealing presence of the god. The poet stands his ground. He refuses to flee, even though he feels overwhelmed by the light that comes flooding in from all directions. It is at this point that the last line of the poem resounds like a clarion call:

“You must alter your life”.

This last phrase of the poem can also be adequately rendered as “you must change your life”. In normal, everyday use the German verb “*ändern*” refers indifferently to “*change*” or to “*alteration*”. But when we pay closer attention to the word we note its etymological reference *ein Ander*, to an *alter* or an *Other*. As moderns we are in the habit of conceiving of change as something that occurs primarily as the result of a material interaction between natural substances and forces. We think of it as due either to some chance event or to our own laborious

interference with the natural order. We locate the ultimate source of change in a natural universe and in a workaday world where we investigate, belabor and modify a faceless and resisting natural order. This manner of thinking is itself embedded in the word "change" which derives from the Late Latin "cambiare" which originally referred to the bending and shaping of pliable materials. But an entirely different register is opened by the German "*ändern*" and the English "*to alter*", where the very idea of change becomes associated with the encounter of an Other. Change is understood in this instance as something that comes about through a personal exchange with an Other. The Latin "alter" referred originally to "the other of a pair", that is, to the "other" of an interacting couple. Thus the words "altering" and "ändern" bear the traces of an ancient understanding concerning what is essential and specific to human and divine relationships. They imply that the most fundamental change that can occur in the human world comes about as a result of the festive meeting of self and other. It is this meeting that lays the foundation of a human and a divine world.

The poet's resolve to "alter" his life does not emerge from an abstract or narcissistic ideal of perfection, nor is it motivated by any willful notion to change the material order of the world. It does not address the quotidian struggle for survival or the need to earn one's daily bread. It only expresses his resolve to alter his life by turning to an Other and thereby enter into a truer, deeper, more revealing relationship to his world. This final resolve and this last word of the poem speak of an immemorial longing for the Other that lays the foundation for a human world. Within this purview a work of art always repeats the miracle of the creation of the human world. It celebrates the birth of conversation, the exchange of gifts and the coming into being of a first host and guest relation. That birth took place when a mother first smiled upon her child and when a first god entered into a hospitable and reciprocal relation with mortal human beings.

This primordial act of hospitality is echoed in every poem when it invites the reader to enter its domain. It is repeated every time a piece of sculpture offers its world to a viewer and every time a temple invites a believer to enter its premise and to encounter the god. A work of art is born every time a generous host creates a hospitable place and bids his guests, his readers, his viewers or his audience, to cross the threshold and to participate in a conversation. The work of art will last as long as there are guests who will gather under its roof and as long as the desire remains alive to continue the conversation among neighbors and across the generations. It is in this way that the work of a sculptor, poet, painter or thinker forever celebrates and repeats the gesture through which a human world came into being. That gesture transformed a merely natural world into a place of habitation and a

merely creaturely living alongside each other into a gift exchange and a neighborly conversation.

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