An Introduction to the Hermeneutics of Luigi Pareyson

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La vera interpretazione è quella che si consegue ai limiti della comprensibilità.—L. Pareyson

1. PREMISES

This introductory critical assessment of Luigi Pareyson’s thought, being part of a larger project, is to be understood bearing the following three perspectives in mind. First, within the horizon of the theory-method relation. Second, in terms of a referential hermeneutic yardstick which will serve as an external, “empirical control,” or better yet, a screen upon which to trace the movements of about ten conditions to be met. And third, in view of a still-in-progress idea of interpretation as diaphoristics.

Concerning the first parameter, we are provisionally going to assume that interpretation is constituted and activated by a grounding dialectic between the requirements of epistemology, which underlie and legitimate methodic process, and those of ontology, which are inherent in theory. Otherwise stated, one cannot use or apply a critical method without at the same time positing a referential ontology, whether explicitly or tacitly; vice
versa, one cannot theorize about any object or phenomenon, be it Picasso's *Guernica*, the university system or Kafka's texts, without resorting to certain systematic, organizational "moves," in other words, without doing it methodically. This will explain, I hope, my emphasis on specific key terms and tenets of Pareyson's thought, instead of others which, though important enough to warrant other perspectives, need not occupy us here.\(^2\)

The second parameter for our reading is constituted by certain more or less established principles of hermeneutics as derived primarily from the tradition that leads into, and is systematized by, the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. A makeshift compendium of Gadamer's thought—which is at the same time sensitive to the conceptual innovations brought about by Schleiermacher, Hegel, Dilthey, Husserl and Heidegger\(^3\)—would give us the following decalogue:

Interpretation is, intrinsically, historical, linguistic, dialectical, ontological, the event of being, objective, begins with the text, exists within the present of the interpreter, is a disclosing of truth, and, finally, interpretation is the locus where the aesthetic has been absorbed by or transformed into the genuinely hermeneutic.\(^4\)

The specific range and depth of each of these terms will become evident through this reading and in the conclusions.

The critical metaphor of the *Diaphora* derives from another context, one in which poetry and philosophy are not conceived as being in opposition to each other, or in radical, mutually exclusive antithesis, but, rather, as necessarily co-originary and thus constantly con-versing. The interpretation of the text comes into existence when it enters this field, initiating a dialogue with several voices, a mise-en-scene which might be, but does not have to be a mise-en-abyme, a speaking, we might say, with several possible differentiated characters.\(^5\)

2. AESTHETICS

First published in 1954 after studies on existentialism, Jaspers and German idealism,\(^6\) Luigi Pareyson's *Estetica: teoria della for-matività* is the third and last (after Croce's and Gentile's) of the great books on aesthetics written in this century in Italy, coming out at a time when this genre seemed to have outlived its reason to be.\(^7\) The importance of this work rests on its being the first, at least in the Italian panorama, to deal with the being of the interpreter and the being of art, setting them in relation by means of interpre-
tation itself, and describing the process in ontological terms. The key term in Pareyson is *Forma* in its dynamic, interacting sense. As such Forma is, at any one time, either *forma formante*—form as an enabling process which gives a specific shape to whatever it is dealing with—or *forma formata*—form as what something exhibits when at rest, what makes it recognizable as such. Pareyson anchors his vision in the heart of human existence, believing that humankind in its broadest sense is essentially a producer of forms (*Estetica* 19-23 et passim). Thus Forma exists "as an organism living of its own life and inner legitimation, closed and open both within the definiteness that encloses the infinite" [come organismo vivente di propria vita e legalità interna, conclusa ed aperta insieme nella sua definitezza che racchiude l'infinito].

From these premises, art is described by means of a phenomenology of its realization or "coming into being" [nel suo farsi]. Here we discover that art is both *production* and *invention*, which means that in effect art is a making which invents its own manner or way of doing, realizing itself as a series of attempts toward a successful or fulfilled completion [tentativi verso la riuscita]. One cannot produce art without inventing the means to "make" it, but, by the same token, one does not invent anything unless it is also produced, made real. The underlying principle is called *forming-activity* [formatività, literally 'formativity'], which assumes a content, a material means and an inner working law peculiar and specific to it (*E* 22-27). Among the preliminary findings of this position is that, above all, art is conscious of and respects the alterity of the work, "protecting" it so to speak from blind insight or misguided appropriation. Later, the same concern with alterity will mark interpretation in general.

3. ART

If, as Pareyson holds, art is a forming-activity both specific and intentional, then the question arises: How do we distinguish it from the rest of experience, if our entire existence is dependent upon this forming capacity?

First point: *Art has no pre-established end*—that is, it is not a forming-activity of anything in particular, but form which aims at becoming *Form*, and that's all. Notice how this sounds very much like what was postulated by such diverse and indeed strange bedfellows as Benedetto Croce and Gertrude Stein. But this ought not to be seen as a contradiction or inconsistency as much as the fullest exploitation of what both the Idealistic tradition and the
Idealism of all theorizing done by artists in general have yielded as unshakable premises of cultural humankind: every person is an idealist at one time or another; moreover, let’s not forget that idealist/idealism contains the root notion of idea, eidos, vision. However, we will also see radical divergencies among these positions once we explore other aspects. For instance, Pareyson says that thinking and ethics, though subordinated to the “formation principle,” interact with it, so that the forming-activity [formatività] is directed at a given action or phenomenon by taking into consideration thought—i.e., that which thought has formulated—while at the same time respecting its alterity. This argument rests on the fundamental ontology of the persona, or person, which in Pareyson embodies the opening or disclosedness as the coincidence of self-relation and hetero-relation. Person, in short, can be thought of as the recognition of alterity, and is therefore eminently social, interpersonal. It can be seen that the argument is pointing toward a dialogics of sorts. But to defer this discussion, it should also be clear that art may—it doesn’t have to—incorporate the contribution of thought (of ethics, ideology, politics), without sacrificing its primary ideal, which is to become Form. This will be crucial to criticism, as we will see further down.

On the other hand, even in terms of action guided by what sounds like a very pragmatic telos—whether it regards shaping an idea, or a simple constructive gesture, or even just going through the rituals of everydayness handed down through history—people always try to do things “aesthetically.” In the original Italian, Pareyson relies on the idiomatic expression fare le case ad arte, literally “to make things as if they were a work of art,” better yet, “to do it right,” or according to the inner necessity to do things well, perfectly and beautifully. In art there’s a shaping-activity which seeks the Forming process itself: though each and every human action is forming-activity [formatività], the work qua work of art is Formation [formazione], “in the sense that the work intentionally aims at Formation, and thought and action intervene only in order to insure that it reaches it” (E 23).

The work of art is also intrinsically matter/substance, in Italian materia, a concrete entity that denies the genitive to art insofar as it must evidence itself as pure form. As such, the material aspect of the work sets up a polarity with respect to the shaping principle of the artistic process, which is identified as puro tentare, pure groping and attempting. This calls to mind another vector, the pull of interpretive dynamics, the seeking of a path guided by a Form which is not yet there (and is, therefore, unknown, ungraspable, invisible so to speak) and must, therefore, be guessed or divined:
The divination of form is thus only a law guiding the execution in progress, a law that cannot be explicated in terms of precepts, but rather, as an inner norm of the action aiming at its successful completion \([\textit{alla riuscita}]\); thus it is not a single law valid for all artistic cases, but a rule which is immanent to the one specific process in question. (E 75)

For Pareyson this is consistent with the traditional notion of art as a making, admitting both \textit{téchnē} and \textit{poiein}, as well as with the more (historically) recent idea of \textit{lo stile è l'uomo}, Buffon's "the style is the man," a very fortunate ideologeme crucial to the understanding of Modern, especially post-Romantic, aesthetics. In fact, in Pareyson's universe one finds Goethe, Poe, Schelling, Fichte, Bergson, Valery, Dewey.\(^{11}\) It is worth remarking on how Pareyson interprets Kant's aesthetics of disinterested and detached contemplation. Pareyson "extracts" from the "Analytic of the Sublime" materials to integrate into his notion of person:

The sublime is therefore the only instance, in Kant's aesthetics, of an aesthetic judgment which is truly and properly expression of a feeling [\textit{sentimento}], in the sense that it offers to this feeling a sensible figuration. It is a contemplation which is expression, that is, not only recognition, but an active attribution of spiritual senses: it is the transfiguration of reality as figuration of a feeling [\textit{sentimento}]. (EK 135)

Further down, the very description/interpretation of the sublime is predisposed to an existential, dialogic, inter-\textit{personal} dynamics:

If the beautiful is the object of a judgment of taste, the sublime "comes from a spiritual sentiment"; if the beautiful concerns a relationship between subject and object in which the active role is played somehow by the latter, in predisposing itself to the exigencies of the former, the sublime instead concerns the relationship of subject and object in which the active role is played by the subject, which transfers unto the object its inner feeling [\textit{interno sentimento}]. If the contemplation of the beautiful is a calm recognizing, the contemplation of the sublime is an emotionally charged attributing of spiritual meanings to nature [\textit{la contemplazione del sublime è un commosso rivestire di sensi spirituali la natura}]. (EK 136)

In either case it can be seen how his theory of art is at once antithetical to Kant's, as we saw above when he states that art has no purpose, and yet a "development" of some deeply buried premises of the \textit{Third Critique}. Contrary to what Gadamer does, which is to critique the aesthetic consciousness as a sort of aliena-
tion, as "differentiation" with respect to reality and finally for its abstract dogmatism which prevented the understanding of art as also (if not primarily) "a mode of self-understanding" (Truth and Method 86), Pareyson retrieves the "conscious act" of the experience of the sublime and the beautiful and underscores the founding necessary aspect which is related to the forming activity of the person: receptivity, in short, is an activity, and insofar as it is a doing, it is poiein, it is a producer of forms, of discourse we might say. Ergo the aesthetic experience is intrinsically related to the interpretive one, which is characterized as dialectic-productive.12 His aesthetic is finally anchored to the three notions of Production, Interaction, and Forming-activity.

4. The Ontology

If everything in life and, therefore, in understanding depends upon this formative process, the notion of making, of fare, assumes paramount relevance and must be examined closely. For the Italian philosopher, any given action is the specification and the instancing of one activity which is at the same time the concentration of all other possible activities. More than that, we form things by "making" and by "inventing" the way things can be made:

l'artista deve fare ciò che non esiste ancora, e quindi deve inventare eseguendo, mentre il lettore deve cogliere ciò che esiste già e quindi deve eseguire riconoscendo. (E 249)

[The artist must make what does not yet exist, and must, therefore invent while executing, whereas the reader must gather [also: grasp; perceive] what exists already, therefore, execute while recognizing.]

The proper evaluation both of the difference and the distinction between artist and reader has always been a problematical point in interpretation theory. We must remember that, especially in the wake of "committed" art (or art specifically intended for a particular end, message or effect), the re-establishment of a boundary between art as totally free and preoccupied solely with Pure Form, and reading (=criticism) as bound and committed to an extra-aesthetic task, has basically given legitimacy to the epistemological approach to art and interpretation, and has indeed contributed to that artistic "alienation" which characterizes the Modern period. There are, however, several places in the Estetica where from the point of view of understanding, there is no distinction between artist and critic, it being simply a question of position
or emphasis: the artist will strive toward the realization of Pure Form, the reader toward the comprehension of the same. Yet the underlying ontology is the same, suggesting a difference of degree rather than of kind. Nevertheless, to return to the text, we begin to see, for instance, that the possibilities open to the work of art are infinite because it rests upon what Pareyson in a later work—Verità e Interpretazione, 1972—calls the ontology of the inexhaustible [ontologia dell’inesauribile]:

non il nulla, ma l’essere, non l’assenza ma la ridondanza . . . non l’Abgrund ma l’Urgrund (VI 40)

[Not nothingness, but being, not absence but redundancy . . . not the Abgrund but the Urgrund]

This is an important consideration in light of the fact that Pareyson’s thought is also typically interpreted, especially for its more existentialist traits, as already on the way toward the post-metaphysical, in that it stresses the Abgrund (or the Un-grund) of being in close connection with what he elsewhere terms the “ontology of freedom.” Yet the very possibility of an ongoing (i.e., historical) thinking of being whose relationship to existence is marked by endless revelations [rivelazioni] about a reality which, no matter how defined, is “gratuitous” [gratuita], must speak the language of events that have already taken place, what in other philosophies are called monuments, tradition, the collective unconscious. This is an open door to the discourse on myth, the arché and origin. The ontology is inexhaustible because the monuments, the traces, the memories are endless, because there has always been an Urgrund. The constructions (the hypotheses, the wars, the revolutions and the archives) which we cast and haul about reality suspended between necessity and possibility do indeed expose their weak side to a possible “anthropomorphism,”13 but they also allow us to retrieve those forms which, though no longer believed universal, did however embody an attempt or express a will to some notion of universality or totality at various points in our history. These are, have been, effective history. As such, though Pareyson has made an almost categorical distinction between mythical and rational discourse,14 what is here suggested is that the notion of Urgrund does not have to be automatically read as a teleological, absolute (perhaps “Hegelian”) and foundational gesture, because the telos here can be delimited, circumscribed, localized and personalized, consistent with Pareyson’s thoughts on the experience of art, which, as we saw above, does yet have
some sort of (no matter how "special") end, without having to make claims for all Art. I think this disclosure, this openness in Pareyson’s overall philosophy can be useful if we want to regain an idea of history and of symbolic and figural signification which, in the wake and under the influence of Heidegger, Derrida and Benjamin, is not bound exclusively to the predominance of the ontological difference or event, the trace or the monument. Perhaps what is important to bear in mind is the problem of reality and the responsibility of the single individual, issues which existentialism treated in depth but these days are too often dismissed or simply forgotten. Man is always a person [persona], which leads the philosopher to assert that no philosophy is plausible which is not above all a “philosophy of the person,” where both the subjective and objective genitive obtain. The discourse thus far rests upon these premises:

anzitutto il principio per cui ogni operare umano è sempre insieme ricettività e attività, e in secondo luogo il principio per cui ogni operare umano è sempre personale. (E 180)

[Above all [is] the principle according to which every human doing is always both receptivity and activity, and secondly according to the principle whereby every human doing is always personal.]15

On the same page we read that:

Io devo si agire e decidere, ma anche non posso non decidere: v’è, nella mia libertà, nella libertà ch’io sono a me stesso, una necessità iniziale, ch’è il segno del mio esser principiato, del mio limite, della mia finitezza, d’una ricettività iniziale e costitutiva per cui io sono dato a me stesso e la mia iniziativa è data a se stessa. (ibid.)

[I must indeed act and decide, but also: I cannot not decide: there is, in the freedom I have with respect to myself, an initial necessity—which is the sign of my being principled, of my limits, and of my finitude—a necessity for an initial and constitutive receptivity so that I may be given over to myself and my initiative is given over to itself.]

In the same context the philosopher says in fact that “the form itself of receptivity is an activity,” though human making/doing [operare] in not, initially, creative. To accept the dialectic of stimulus-response does not mean subscribing to deterministic passivity, but rather that the dyad receptivity-activity is always active, connective and developing according to other intentional premises.
5. Knowledge and Interpretation

Perceptive knowledge [conoscenza sensibile] can grasp reality only insofar as it is marked by prefiguration, therefore, only insofar as it can “produce and form” an image, “more to the point, an image so well executed [riuscita] that it reveal, better, that it be the thing itself” [un’immagine così ben riuscita che riveli anzi sia la cosa stessa]. In other words, the intention to capture or penetrate the item in question implies, solicits and even exacts the productivity which will literally figure out the image.

As a result, human knowledge in general has an intrinsic interpretive character. Interpretation, says the philosopher,

is a type of knowledge exquisitely active and personal: its active nature explains its productive and formative character, and its personal nature explains how it is essentially movement, restlessness, a search for syntony or resonance, in sum, endless figuration. (E 179-80; my emphasis)

One can see how at this particular juncture Pareyson’s position comes very close to some recent readings of both Freud and Nietzsche as the thinkers of interminable analysis or interpretation. Moreover, coming from a totally different background, by underscoring figuration, his theory is proleptically in tune with our postmodern hermeneutics. We will return to these considerations further down.

At this point we have established that interpretation is based upon the person, which coincides with the knowing being, the forming being, whereas the work (opera in the Italian, not a minor detail, suggesting process, temporality, indeed “working”) is what is known, what is already formed. Interpretation then is formante or “forming,” the work is formata or “formed.” Said metaphorically, interpretation is “a seeing which lets itself be regarded, and a regarding that aims at seeing . . . a hearing which lets itself be listened to, and a listening that means to be heard” [un vedere che si fa guardare, e un guardare che mira al vedere . . . l’udire che si fa ascoltare e l’ascoltare che vuol farsi udire].

In order to reduce the risk of stray or biased interpretation, it is important that interpretation be sensitive to the question(s) raised by the object or the work in question and that, moreover, it organize itself in such a way as to be able to construct freely, “developing and elaborating, opening up and revealing the interpretand itself” [sviluppando e svolgendo, cioè interrogando, aprendo e
rivelando l'interpretrando]. Thus, without forgetting the person who does the interpreting, the person who, in giving account, is constantly trying to confer a meaning or portray a sense, we are also attuned to the possibilities of constant figuration which the interpreting act elicits and thinking imagines.

Now this notion of interpretation as tightly connected to the idea of persona is more fully developed in Pareyson’s abovementioned later work entitled Verità e Interpretazione. Here we find another crucial term, pensiero rivelativo, which we can literally render as “revealing thought.” According to Pareyson, the distinct notions of saying, revealing and expressing coincide:

that the word is revealing is a sign of the validity of a thought which is intrinsically speculative yet not oblivious to being, and that the word is expressive is a sign of the historical concreteness of a thought that has not forgotten time. (VI 23)

On the basis of the foregoing sketch of the basic tenets, it can be intuited that the Italian philosopher is moving cautiously among many of his contemporaries, but there is doubt that he is here also staking out his own theoretical horizon. If historiographic triangulations are at all useful, we can suppose that the way Heidegger was reacting to the idealist strain in Husserl and the Marburg neokantians, Pareyson was reacting to Croce and Gentile’s idealism as well as to Banfi’s transcendental phenomenology, which had come on the Italian scene in the late twenties.17 Pareyson seems to be introducing an ontological perspective which is reconceptualized in terms of being and time in order to supplant historicist thought (but I suspect also the notion of the historical in the strictly Enlightenment and then positivist sense), a stance which is critical of instrumentalism, culturalism, biografism and all those historicist aporias which reduce everything to the immanence of a given historical situation, or to an idealized pragmaticism.

Yet a thinking which is also a revealing cannot circumvent the issue as well as the reality of history and expression because of truth no evidence can be adduced except through history, through society, through the discourses made for or by history. In this sense, in view of its being intrinsically “personal,” interpretation must of necessity be also historically and linguistically understood. With these requirements, what counts is not reason, but truth, because reason without truth yields the irrational, and reason can be only either technical or historical. This subtle way
of dealing with history may be worth pondering further: it is truth, says the philosopher, that grounds [radica] reason, because:

anche gli aspetti più ‘teoretici’ quali l’interesse puramente culturale della storia delle idee o il rigore strettamente scientifico delle ricerche metodologiche, non resistono a una radicalizzazione che li spinge inevitabilmente all’esito irrazionalistico d’uno storicismo integrale e d’un esplicito prassismo (VI 24)

[even the most ‘theoretical’ aspects such as the purely cultural interests of the history of ideas or the strictly scientific rigor of methodological research, cannot resist the radicalization that pushes them inevitably toward the irrational consequences of an integral historicism and an explicit praxism.]

Truth instead is equated with being. Being, says Pareyson, is not a value, otherwise it would be subordinated to the values instituted by mankind, and would tend to classify itself as either lasting or provisional. Rather,

L’essere non ha nessun motivo per preferire il durevole al momentaneo. . . . Il problema è di riconoscere nella storia la presenza dell’essere, e quindi di distinguere in ciò che è tutto equalmente storico ed espressivo del proprio tempo: fra ciò ch’è solamente storico ed espressivo e ciò ch’è anche ontologico e rivelativo, fra ciò la cui natura e il cui valore si esauriscono nella storicità, e ciò la cui storicità è apertura e tramite dell’essere, e quindi sede della sua apparizione. (ibid. 42)

[Being has no particular reason to prefer what lasts to what is momentary. . . . The problem is to recognize the presence of being in history, and, therefore, to distinguish in that which exists what is equally historical and expressive in one’s time: between that which is only historical and expressive, whose nature and whose value are exhausted in historicity, and that whose historicity is disclosure and medium of being and thus locus of its apparition. (first emphasis is mine)]

In short, no evidence of being can be given which is not at the same time historically configured: being does—must—appear in history. The abovementioned notion of ontological inexhaustibility is now given body and contour: the interpreting person will insist on both the co-presencing in time of a historical and revealing act, as well as the experience of the open-ended discourse ever in proximity to other possible “figural” formations.

In this context, another key notion in Pareyson’s thought is Tradition, which already in the 1954 Estetica was conceived as
existing within the work of art. Tradition is crucial because it supplies the plenum between the interpreter and the work within which interpretation can be configured. The interpretand’s position within this slippery, groundless, apparently elusive critical horizon required, in the earlier book, that in approaching the concrete work, the artifact, we had to be exposed to at least three concerns: the school or current which nourished the work, its living reality (its socio-historical instancing, we might say), and “the original result of the working interpretation which the work itself yields up” [il risultato originale dell’interpretazione operante ch’essa ne dà], which is to say the spontaneous claim made by the work with respect to how it wishes (or exacts) to be understood. 18 Again we have an operative trilateral cognitive model which the work elicits upon the interpreter’s approaching it, disclosing an enabling capacity, we might even say the agency to spur a dialogue with whoever comes into contact with it.

It may be opportune to recall that this rooting of tradition in the work itself is not peculiar to Pareyson’s work. In fact, it is not foreign to literary hermeneutics as elaborated, in their different ways, by both Gadamer and Peter Szondi, according to whom, and with particular reference to biblical exegesis, the history of a text is also the (hi)story of its interpretations. In particular, Gadamer’s notion of tradition as Ueberlieferung, or trans-mission, is also not too distant conceptually from Pareyson’s. It is significant, finally, that Gadamer and Pareyson both are behind (and seem to come together in) Vattimo’s notion of Verwindung, wherein tradition is understood as a necessarily twisted and distorting appropriation of what precedes, never an overcoming, or Ueberwindung. 19

Yet there are traits which are specifically Pareyson’s and can be very suggestive for future analyses, especially from what is left of the left. Tradition is to be distinguished above all from the notion of Revolution (today this is anachronistic, but, again, let’s not forget what were the “timely” issues in the wake of World War II). Tradition, we learn, is the exact opposite of revolution, not because it counterfoists to it some variant of conservation, but because revolution means to start all over at the beginning, which means its object is the past (an invented pure past projected into an unlikely future), whereas tradition (and interpretation through, indeed as, tra-dition) is the regeneration of an ontological necessity, it aims at recapturing the origin and its object is being. We can infer that interpretation, and the notion of tradition it espouses, is, therefore, never utopistic, dreamy or nostalgic (in the
sense in which these three words have something incoherent and
disable about them). Interpretation is, on the contrary, topical,
desired, at worst melancholic, though this latter only signals its being
sense-oriented (or "sensitive"), a type or way of knowing nevertheless—at best a work of art itself.20

Before we make our way toward an overall retrospective picture of Pareyson’s theory of interpretation, we must recall three
more points. First, that interpretation in its active verbal accepta-
tion, as interpreting [interpretare], is always a transcending process.
Second, that the notion of originality—novelty of the person and
of time, the “new” of the avant-gardes and Modernism, we might
add—is the same as the notion of being originary—as derived
from the primordial ontological rapport, which is constitutively
“originating.” Therefore, to be original is to be originary, and the
originary is always original. In a post-Derridian epoch, we can
see how this is important. And third, that

Interpretation is that form of knowledge which is at once and in-
separably historical and truthful [veritativa], ontological and per-
sonal, revealing and expressive. (VI 53)

[L'interpretazione è quella forma della conoscenza che è insieme e
inseparabilmente veritativa e storica, ontologica e personale,
rivelativa ed espressiva.]

The implications of this for critics of art and culture: when
approaching a text, comprehension is possible only insofar as the
text reveals itself, but this revealing in turn needs the other (that
is, the interpreting persona) in order to be expressed: to listen
(look, sense) and to speak are inseparable: interpretation is not a
game of silence, but the speaking that issues from the silence that
enwraps the artwork. The fact that the revealing of the artifact
and the speaking of the interpreter go inextricably together or,
said otherwise, that interpretation is always a critique of some-
thing or other, brings us to yet another fine point in Pareyson’s
thought, one that has sweeping consequences for the “practical”
aspect of criticism and commentary. When interpreting, says the
philosopher, we are not striving for analysis, but rather for synthe-
sis. This may trigger an alert signal, for it does resonate with
similar idealist and historicist versions (like Croce’s, for instance—
and we don’t need “impressionist” criticism—), yet it also beckons
to Heidegger’s “hearing the call of the poetical.” In fact, by
minimizing the obsessive preoccupation with objectivity—the in-
preter does not, cannot, “objectify” him/herself, nor can the
work of art itself ever be thought of as being only an “object”—it also avoids the relativism of methodologism, as well as any arbitrariness and all skepticism. In this fashion, hermeneutics turns away from the constraints and the aporias of epistemology and is open to the possibilities of ontology, an eminently linguistic, “narrative” perspective.

What is open to the interpreter are the historical concretions of being as they manifest themselves in specific events and by and large in cultural phenomena. What for many thinkers is sought as the unity in variety or the multiplicity of truth is, according to Pareyson, a false dilemma, because these different formulations do not exist in history, as if they were contents dropped into the abstract river of time; rather, they are history, so that each interpretation of these problems is but a singular exegetical concretion, which is as plausible as, and not exclusive of, many others that have actually come into being. The same can thus be said of the many and varied interpretations of works of art. This is particularly evident in the case of artworks that necessarily dilate the notion of interpretation, like drama and musical scores; these artistic phenomena are in fact interpreted each and every time they are performed. The artwork does not disappear amidst the multiplicity of interpretive reappraisals, but remains true to itself even in the act of disclosing its being to the interpreter:

Le esecuzioni, al pari delle interpretazioni, sono sempre nuove, non mirano ad essere uniche e esemplari e totalizzanti, ma parlano a tutti nella maniera in cui ciascuno sa meglio intenderle. (VI 67)

[Much like interpretations, performances are always new; they do not aim at being unique and exemplary and totalizing, rather, they speak to all in the manner in which each one knows how to understand them.]

This position, already elaborated in part in Estetica 226-47, can be compared with Benjamin’s reflection on the reproducibility of the work of art: the aura may be gone, but the problem of interpreting/performing postmodern art forms persists, and with a different agenda.

6. DEVELOPING THE CONSEQUENCES

We can see now that the interpreter is not a “subject” that dissolves into the work, or, vice versa, that absorbs and dissolves
the work in its interpreting act. The interpreter does not have to "depersonalize" itself in a vain—and unneeded—effort to be "true" and "distanced" from the artwork. For the interpreter is primarily a person, open and ever ready to disclose itself to other(s). In tune with this premise, the work is never an "object" which ought to be "represented" externally: the work is finally characterized by an intrinsic "unobjectifiability" [inoggettivibilità] which derives from its needing to be activated, realized or performed (in the sense of esecuzione, mise-en-scene)—and reading also, according to Pareyson, is performing—and which cannot be reduced to any one of its performances or realizations.

What this entails, in more broad hermeneutic terms, is an authentic "overcoming of the subject" that in turns neutralizes the subjectivistic attitude toward interpretation—which is present in both scientific and phenomenological thought—with its tendency to universalize the impersonal and placing it as the foundation of thought itself. With the notion of person as derived from Pareyson, on the other hand, we are co-involved in the irreducible distance of the artwork, but at the same time we rely on its unique and singular historical substance. And going against Kantian claims of impersonality, the disclosure of the text is radically personal, avoiding thus abstractions and theoretical relativisms of all sorts. Before the artwork, we must listen,

because truth is not something that man invents or produces, or that can be invented or produced in any fashion; one must let truth be without pretending to invent it; and if the person becomes the means of its revelation, this is above all in order to be the locus of its occurrence [sede del suo avvento]. (VI 84)

In sum, truth can issue solely from within one of its formulations, "with which each time it identifies itself, and within which it resides always as something inexhaustible." On the other side of methodologism and its epistemological legitimations, interpretation aspires toward pure theory without ever becoming Theory, and yet theoretical it must remain, that is, a contemplative discourse which inscribes situations and topics, and can therefore serve as a principle of valid cultural transformations.

7. Provisional Conclusions

If we return to our initial frames of reference, we find that Pareyson's thought confirms and expands our hermeneutic
model. To begin with, in terms of the theory-method relation, or the equiprimordial, co-founding dialectic between method as praxiological, instrumental means of knowledge gathering, and theory as the rhetorical postulate of a world-view or legitimizing ontology, Pareyson leans toward the latter without entirely dissociating himself from the former. That he emphasizes theory above method is to be understood in part in terms of what was then, right after World War II, a historical and contextual necessity to realign scientific, rationalistic and phenomenological methods of inquiry; yet it can be argued that, volens nolens, he himself deploys a loosely adapted but no less rigorous phenomenology. In effect, the path in between—the meta-hōdos—artwork and interpreter cannot even be described without a logos which is at the same time (true to the several meanings that, etymologically, it embodies) the revealing word and the temporally determined, discursive inscription of the interpreting act itself. Elaborating on the metaphors suggested by the respective etymologies of method (pathway between two or more loci) and theory (light in the clearing, overall vision), then we can say that with Pareyson interpretation entails no longer a formulaic and alienating relation between theories and methods ready to hand, but a temporal-existential vicissitude of walking (toward) and seeing (while being seen) at the same time the potential disclosure of the artwork (of reality, in broad terms). The implications outside the here thematized field of (literary and artistic) interpretation are that, with his notions of forming-activity and person, Pareyson discloses the aesthetic to the ethic, and in the end the social, and can thus lead us onward to a general theory of being in the world.23

Concerning the second frame of reference sketched out at the beginning of this paper—namely, that there are at least ten conditions to be met for any interpretive discourse to be called hermeneutical—it seems evident that with Pareyson we can really speak of a hermeneutic experience as constitutive of the human dimension in its totality: life is an endless shaping and forming, and interpretation is the highest and most self-conscious, reflective type of shaping (for both the artist and the critic). We can go through each of the requirements of our makeshift decalogue and find that, for Pareyson, interpretation is:

1. Intrinsically historical: being, truth and the work of art itself are, as we saw above, essentially historical notions, even though they may not be identified with history tout court, and retain yet an ideal constitution.
2. Intrinsically linguistic: any formulation about an artifact comes into being primarily as a linguistic formulation: listening to the speaking of the revealing work means responding with a theoretical—i.e., "rhetorical"—formulation.

3. Dialectic: in its broadest, unthematized sense, there is no doubt that the several interconnections that refer to one another constantly require an enabling dialectic; moreover, the relation between presence and the given, time and being, listening and speaking are possible only as dialogue (we may think here of the common etymon of dialectic and dialogue). These themes are developed in Pareyson's work on German idealism.

4. Ontologic: it is so by definition; as we saw during the course of our exposition, to interpret means to engage in a continuous recalling and recovery of being as it manifested itself in historical concretions and in artworks in particular, each and every time aspiring to an ever elusive fullness of being. The ontologic here stands for the interface between what metaphysics has said being is, as well as what it concealed in the transmission of the givenness of untold concrete beings.

5. The work and the interpreter are together the site of the occurrence of being: being is not created artificiously, demanding rather that the interpreter/artist stay in wait "listening" until the unconcealing "happens," "alights."

6. Objective: in the sense in which it is not "subjective" as understood by our post-cartesian mind set; more than that, however, objective here stands for the recognition (against idealist claims) that the artwork must "exist" in concreto, as a tangible, verifiable "something" an artist (or anyone) has actually made or produced.

7. Begins with the text: there's no idolatry of the text as we have come to know it after Lacan and Derrida; rather, text is both the entity and the metaphor for the actual artwork, and it includes the canvas as well as the stage representation, the statue as well as the manuscript. Much of this can be inferred from the long section Pareyson devotes to "reading" in the Estetica.

8. Understands what is being said in light of the present: no pseudo anti-metaphysics of "presence" here, for the present is the historical actualitas of the interpreter. Interpretation is grounded in the unrepeatable, irreplaceable experience of the person, and the interpreting act comprehends primarily in view of its present. Despite thematic, geographic and chronological distances, the interpreting act discloses the temporality of its being as such-and-such in a precise given moment, which is the "time of its occurrence."
9. Broaching the boundaries of the distinguishable, interpretation is—cannot but be—truth, critical, necessary, midway between theory and practice, recalcitrant to ideology, the string from which pends the fate of existence and liberty.

10. It can be argued that Pareyson would want hermeneutics to be subsumed to aesthetics, yet it cannot be denied that the primacy placed on the person, on the act of interpreting and on the necessity of the other (vis-a-vis the artwork) can also lead one to see the two poles, aesthetics and hermeneutics, as the recto and verso of the same inscription. Moreover, the fact that such a premium value is placed upon the “forming ability” of all experience, may lend credence to the claim, made later by Gadamer, that indeed aesthetics must be understood as simply one (though privileged) dimension of the hermeneutic experience.

8. **Other Implications**

What are some practical consequences for literary theory? Some suggestions are offered by the philosopher himself. The problem of “content” is not essential—which is not to say it isn’t important. Rather, the critic should be aware that themes, subjects, arguments, and so on are subsumed to the more radical question of style, which is an ontologically determining factor insofar as it constitutes, in non-Pareysonian terms, the “signature” of the artist. This points up to the rhetorical import of the concretization of the work, it being understood that rhetoric is not mere tropology or stylistics, but the locus of linguistic occurrence, the middle ground between langue and langage, the hermeneutic discipline of topics. Pareyson writes that we can have art without theme or content—accepting the diverse manifestations of the twentieth century—i.e., the avant-gardes, which Croce, Lukacs and others couldn’t stand and wouldn’t deign to remark on—but there is no artwork qua artwork without a distinctive style.

A second important contribution which stems from this hermeneutic is that poetics are extremely important. Here we should open up a long digressive paragraph on the several meanings of the word “poetics.” Suffice it to say that poetics is something different from what the structuralists have theorized over the past quarter of a century or so. In this context, poetics correspond to what artists say about art in general and their own work in particular. It should not be confused with aesthetics, which is normative (E 311-13) and speculative (316-18). Poetics is programmatic, pragmatic, it aspires to a totality which is such only and exclusively
for that one particular artist and often for the execution of one particular work:

that the artist represent or transfigure, the essential thing is that he "figures"; whether he deforms or transforms, the important thing is that he "forms." It is necessary that art be informed by a poetic which, in its concrete praxis, fuels it and upholds the formation of the work, but there is no one poetic more essential than any other. (E 314)

Going against what Croce and Binni in Italy and Northrop Frye in North America held on this issue (and thus implicitly siding, on this argument, with both Anceschi's critical phenomenology and Della Volpe's dialectical materialism), Pareyson believes that an artist's poetic or poetics are crucial to the proper understanding of a given work, if for no other reason than the fact that he/she who makes (tēchnē) the artifact, and lives through the creative (poiein) process, is certainly capable of saying something about what makes the "forming activity" construe a "forma formata," a finished and shaped aesthetic product. Moreover, in view of his general ontological plan, it makes sense to consider the artist the first most original critic of him/herself: the critical-analytical moment interacts not when he/she is at rest (in which case the artist is no different from the plain reader/viewer, and, as we saw above, authorial "intentions" are meaningless), but during the process of the making, while exercising and realizing all possible thoughts and skills toward the accomplishment of the task.

Almost a direct consequence of this revalorization of the artist's "critical" input, in Pareyson's universe criticism coincides with reading, but of a specific kind. Criticism, he writes,

is a kind of reading during which the aspect of judgment is accentuated; moreover, in order to guarantee the soundness of its evaluations, this reading aims at defining and subsuming a method, so that the critic is ultimately methodologically conscious of his own judgments. (EA 261)

Criticism, in short, is always both criticism-of-a-work, and criticism-of-itself, that is, metacriticism. In view also of what we saw earlier in our excursus, we can posit a tripartite segmentation of interpretation into—and as—theoretical hermeneutics, poetics and methodological criticism. Moreover, we discover an exigency to account for the "included" middle (culled from his reinterpretation of the Third Critique) as the kingpin around which the entire pro-
cess rotates in intelligible equilibrium. Leaving aside for the moment the nature and structure of judgment, Pareyson immediately adds that criticism should not “overtake” or “overcome” the work, and ought to think of itself as simultaneously “reading and performance or representation” [lettura ed esecuzione]. The third segment, or the “methodological” or “judgmental” element, orients criticism back to the first, or purely theoretical hermeneutics, coherently with his position as described in the earlier parts of this paper. We can sum up the “three moments” in a makeshift hermeneutic circle:

Finally, with reference to the above mentioned possibility of interpretation as diaphoristics, which claims that interpreting is akin to profounding oneself in the murky waters between poetry and philosophy, Pareyson’s position permits further voyages into these uncharted seas. One question which could in fact be explored with profit is the notion of Urgrund—as opposed to our more familiar, Heidegger-inspired, notion of Abgrund. The latter has yielded riveting results (especially in the investigations of Derrida, playing as it does on the missing half of the signifier which in logocentric discourse is nevertheless bantered “as if” the signified were there. But what deconstruction cannot ever lead us to explore (other than to continually unmask) is the realm of the sociohistorical archetype, which could be given renewed (non-structuralist) vigor through the investigation of the ontological Urgrund in figural and allegorical terms. Conversely, given that, much like Heidegger, Pareyson also (albeit with a different ter-
minology, in part inspired by Jaspers) frames the human dimension as essentially being "thrown into existence," in reason of which man's most constitutive trait is then his "forming" drive, the notion of an Urgrund could also be developed in terms of the necessary "projecting" which both artists and interpreters do constantly. This would reverse the standpoint and lead to the study of "prototypes" of all sorts, and conceivably can be useful in aesthetics as well as in ethics and politics. The value to our diaphoristic ideal is that, after (or at the same time as) the destruction of metaphysical, totalizing perspectives and constructs, the interpreting being finds itself going through discourse formations—dia-logos—positing each and every time—the phoric element—a possible inscription or de-piction (again, a temporally proleptic, enframing futurity) which partakes of aesthesis as well as of thought, of midday as well as midnight. But these conceptual schemes will have to be developed elsewhere.

Notes

1. This is a chapter from my nearly complete book, provisionally titled Thresholds; Italian Literary Criticism and Hermeneutics, 1950-1985. The "Preface" to this work has appeared in The Italian Journal, Vol. II, N. 4 (1988): 36-42. Another chapter, bearing the title "Repositioning Interpretive Discourse," has been published in Differentia 2 (Spring 1988): 83-126. The theoretical matrix is briefly sketched out again in the second paragraph of the present essay.

2. Pareyson's thought can be approached from a number of different areas, all of which inevitably reveal his often subterranean influence during the past forty years. As the titles of his books alone indicate, he has studied German Idealism, Existentialism, the critique of the Italian idealist and historicist hegemony, and has written crucial theoretical works on aesthetics, interpretation theory, and ethics. His Estetica is the starting point for the apparently unrelated positions of the early Eco and Vattimo. For the relationship between interpretation and ethics, see Alberto Rosso's fine study.

3. Not to mention Plato and Aristotle, authors all studied in depth by Gadamer throughout his career and protagonists in his masterpiece Truth and Method.

4. Each of these conditions can be illustrated with a network of references to Gadamer's work, but it would make the present essay too long. I have also kept in view the studies on Gadamer's hermeneutics done by Bleicher, Vattimo, Palmer, Ripanti, Weinsheimer.

5. I have developed this perspective in Carravetta 1990, which emphasizes the challenge of the rhetoric of Nietzsche, and the problem of interpretation at the interfaces between the Modern and the Postmodern epochs.
6. Though we cannot get into extended details here, a reconsideration of Pareyson’s pre-Estetica writings would be useful to reassess how much his notion of persona owes to, and yet is a radicalizing of, German existentialism’s emphasis on the necessary, on repetition, and French existentialism’s stress on the contingent, on choice. See Pareyson 1971:7-110. For his crucial distinction between Heidegger’s and Jaspers’ notion of existenzial/existentiell, see 1971:207-58, besides his book on Jaspers. The various versions of existentialism debated in Italy at the onset of World War II can be assessed by looking at representative texts by Banfi, Abbagnano, Preti, Paci and Pareyson published in Banfi’s quarterly Studi Filosofici, anno II (1941), now available in the 1972 Forni reprint, vol. I, 113-206. For Croce’s scathing reaction to this issue, see Critica, I (1942):48-49. For a balanced history and theory of Italian existentialism, see Santucci, who attributes a major role to Pareyson. For Abbagnano, see his Critical Existentialism. For a global reconstruction within the Italian panorama, especially vis-à-vis the hegemonic idealist-historicist currents, see the different perspectives of Garin and Semerari.

7. A case may be made for Emilio Betti’s Teoria generale dell’interpretazione (1955), though its being almost exclusively a treatise on juridical interpretation makes it less manageable in the realm of aesthetics and literary criticism. There is little echo of Betti’s influence outside of jurisprudence and legal history. Thereafter, however, no one, with the arguable exception of Brandi’s Teoria generale della critica (1974) and Eco’s Semiotica (1975), has attempted to write a general, omnicomprehensive theory of art and interpretation which invests the totality of the human being.

8. The English rendition of these terms is necessarily provisional. It is hoped that the awkwardness is offset by the need to distinguish in the pages that follow among the various terms rooted in Forma which constellate Pareyson’s philosophy. From this point onward, I will use the following abbreviations in my text: Estetica–E; Conversazioni di estetica–CE; L’estetica di Kant–EK; Verità e Interpretazione–VI; I problemi dell’estetica–PE. All translations are my own.

9. See the explication in Rosso. In Croce, on the other hand, thought (or thought which is logical, or philosophical) is fundamentally excluded from the aesthetic act as pure intuition and expression. See his Aesthetic, ch. one. Similarly, in Gertrude Stein, the search is for a rhythmic-expressive language mode which, though yet a speaking, is totally devoid of any “content,” rational or otherwise (where content means or includes the referent). Recall, for example, her Stanzas in Meditation. See the discussion in Caravetta 1985.

10. This aspect, which is revolutionary insofar as it simultaneously opens to the “originary” characteristic of all works of art, as well as to its material and pragmatic necessity, is also a basic potentiality for action and signification characteristic of all human beings. It comes very close to Polanyi’s heuristic imagination and tacit knowing.

11. As Robert Innis once suggested during a conversation, there are some interesting common points between Pareyson’s aesthetics and Dewey’s Art as Experience.

12. It would be useful here to recall Pareyson’s extensive studies on German idealism, in particular his readings of Schiller, Goethe and the late Schelling. Cf. also his Conversazioni and the article “Lo stupore della ragione in Schelling,” in Riconda et al., 137-80.

13. Vattimo 1986 critiques Pareyson for sympathizing too strongly with the “theology” of Kierkegaard and Schelling, jeopardizing the project of secularization, as well as for leaving the issue of freedom open enough to mean or imply a possible (if not emancipation, at least) reconciliation, which would betray a Hegelian strain. In a way, the reservations expressed are directed to Pareyson’s failure at not bringing his perception of the absence of metaphysical foundation...
more in line with Heidegger’s “ontological difference” and Vattimo’s own “weakened being,” which alone, Vattimo claims (1983), can now permit us to ponder whether it is not high time we leave the “question of being” behind.

14. See in particular Esistenza e persona, 14 et infra.

15. This passage follows upon the first definition of interpretation we find in the Estetica: “interpreting [interpretare] is such a form of knowledge for which, on the one hand, receptivity and activity are indistinguishable, and, on the other, the known is a form and the knower is a person. Without a doubt interpreting is knowing . . . since interpreting is gathering, capturing, grasping, penetrating.”

16. Besides Freud and Nietzsche, compare to some of the authors in bibliography. In this paper we can only allude to other areas of exploration.

17. Antonio Banfi’s Principi di una teoria della ragione, which discusses in great detail neokantianism, came out in 1927.

18. This allows Pareyson to sidestep simultaneously the issue of the intentional fallacy known to American Neocriticism, as well as the conundrums of authorial intention which besieged modern hermeneutics from Schleiermacher to Hirsch. Both become irrelevant; cf. E 276-77.

19. Though Vattimo is also constantly harking back to the more “radical” Heidegger—the essay Verwindung deals primarily with Heidegger—as well as to the Benjamin of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.”

20. Pareyson has indeed implied that the “quarrel” between philosophy (as thinking) and art (as creating) need not be and perhaps is not at all a contradiction, an oxymoron, or a reciprocally exclusive dyad of forces where only one in the end conceals the Truth. That has been the metaphysical illusion, the technocratic desire, the rationalist fallacy, the demise of the Modern Epoch: to believe that only philosophy could speak to the truth, that poetry just couldn’t be trusted. Pareyson certainly speaks favorably to this possible dialogue, and even attempts to bridge the chasm between poetry and philosophy: “In the arts there’s a diffuse distrust of philosophy. They fear that the autonomy of art is compromised and that art may disappear. They feel that the cold speculative rigor of philosophy contrasts sharply with the emotional shudder of poetry. But this means ignoring the character of philosophical thinking. There are in philosophy aspects which, if adequately emphasized, make of philosophical meditation genuine and earnest poetry, to the point that it becomes impossible to gauge the speculative value without accounting for its reality as an art form. The search for and discussion about truth, thinking as a personal experience, the liveliness of the imagination which underlies philosophical thought: these are so many aspects of philosophy which, if rendered evident, can confer upon it an artistic aspect. They might even elect to consign reason to the essential [insostituibile, lit. unreplacable] expression of poetry rather than to the precise utterances of reason. And then there is the movement of the research becoming dramatic reality in Plato’s dialogues and in Pascal’s notes; and there is the personal experience becoming absolute identity of art and philosophy in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche; and there is that same philosophical imagination reless in the stylistic exuberance of Giordano Bruno and Vico’s bilenare acutezza. Moreover, there’s an art of philosophizing, a formation-activity intrinsic to philosophy itself: to properly exercise it means aiming for the essential expression, the functional aspect of reasoning, the coherence of the system. So much so that some speculative rigor turns into a literary work, and, in some cases, even a poetic reality. . . . Finally, simply because some romanzi a tesi have failed, we are not authorized to say that purpose [la tesi] kills art: in the hands of a great artist thinking [la tesi] becomes art, because its very art is a theoretical construct [una tesi].” PE 47-49. One cannot but think of Dante as a grand example of this. See also CE 169-79 on art and philosophy in Schelling.
21. Consider the pages on reading in \(E\) 219-26, \(CE\) 41-48, and \(PE\) 189-231.
22. Compare the pages dedicated to the relationship between truth and ideology in \(Verità\), Part II, 93–187.
23. This he does in part in his later works, especially the recently published \(Being and Freedom\) (1986).
24. I have dealt with this topic at some length in my \(Prefaces to the Diaphora\).

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