

INTRODUCTION

Struggling with the Angel

Finitude, Time, and Metaphysical Sentiment

Ugo Perone is one of the most lively, productive, and original contemporary Italian philosophers. Born in Turin in 1945 and educated at the University of Turin under the guidance of Italy's greatest hermeneutician, Luigi Pareyson, Perone was schooled in the study of Secrétan, Schiller, Feuerbach, Benjamin, and Descartes in addition to other major philosophers (especially Hegel, Schelling, Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty) whose names constellate his numerous books. A continual engagement with theology, most notably that of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Bultmann, is also integral to Perone's philosophical research, which in recent years has extended to a consideration of poetry (especially Celan) and narrative as areas capable of crucial philosophical contributions. Following years spent in Germany (Munich, Freiburg, Berlin), since 1993 Perone has been Professor of Moral Philosophy at the Università del Piemonte Orientale in Vercelli.

Perone's philosophical activity has never been confined solely to the world of academia; he has always been an ambassador and promoter of culture and education within the wider public sphere. Founder and director of the prestigious Scuola d'Alta Formazione Filosofica (School of Higher Philosophical Education) in Turin, a postdoctoral institution that has seen the presence of famous philosophers such as Jean-Luc Marion, Dieter Henrich, John Searle, Charles Larmore, Agnes Heller, Emanuele Severino, and Jean-Luc Nancy, Perone has also played a fundamental role in the cultural life of Turin and the surrounding region. During most of the 1990s Perone was involved in the administration of his hometown, Turin, as *assessore alla cultura*; in 2001–2003 he was appointed *clara fama* director of the Italian Cultural Institute in Berlin; and since 2008

he has been *assessore alla cultura* for the province of Turin. Through his conjoining of philosophy and politics, Perone strikes a splendid example of the public intellectual that seems to characterize more than anything else the Italian philosophical tradition ever since the Renaissance.

Perone is an original philosopher and an important thinker who in Italy and Germany enjoys a widespread and well-deserved reputation for his theoretical rigor, clarity, and force of argumentation, as well as for the timeliness, amplitude, and suggestiveness of his philosophical positions. An excursion through some major recurrent themes and categories characterizing his thinking will provide ample evidence for his fame.

The threshold—A widespread tendency among contemporary philosophers constitutes and understands philosophy in terms of a *locus minimum* of thought. That is, the metaphysical instances that had informed the Western way of thinking at least up to Nietzsche, but that still continue even in Heidegger, are fragmented to produce, although not exclusively, one of the following three options: (a) specialized branches of philosophy (such as the various forms of applied philosophy and applied ethics) in which the passion for the whole is put aside in favor of sectorialized fragments of it; (b) the value-free and ultimately empty debates of analytic philosophy's analysis of the consistency of concepts, claims, and theories that reduce the richness of existence and experience to a matter of internal coherence; or (c) the weakening of the philosophical horizon in the various hermeneutic positions up to its dissolution in Derrida's deconstruction and, although less so, in Gianni Vattimo's weak thought.

Unlike, although perhaps not against, all this, Perone understands philosophy as a *locus maximum* in which the truth, being, and the very meaning of the existence of the finite subject are at stake. His analysis is existential-phenomenological in its description of the fundamental structures of existence; his horizon is essentially hermeneutical in his constant referring to notions of sense, being, truth, and even the infinite; and his method is substantially dialectical (albeit of a peculiar dialectic, as we shall see) in his searching for the point capable of holding opposites together. Informed by and yet breaking with much recent thought, Perone advances a strong philosophy with equally strong metaphysical ambitions: what is at stake is being, and "against being, which is strong, we are allowed to be strong," he writes (*Nonostante il soggetto* [Despite the Subject], 108). The center of Perone's metaphysical ambitions, however, is no longer (because, after Nietzsche, it can no longer be) God, the absolute, or the infinite, but rather the finite subject that has lived in and upon itself the break that modernity has brought about, that is, the break inflicted by a process of secularization (Nietzsche's death of God) that cannot be denied or easily dismissed. In this sense, although with no explicit admission, Perone's

thought complies with the invitation to “remain faithful to the earth” that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra passionately advocates.

Perone’s philosophy is thus very ambitious; his guiding strategy and his philosophical goal is to maintain the questions of modernity while also accepting the legacy of modernity (that is, the fact that we cannot return to modernity *tout court*). Moreover, his project is ambitious because, in times of fragmentation and deconstruction, his thinking is aimed at designing a full-fledged philosophy, or even a metaphysics, and not simply a way or path of thinking (Heidegger’s various *Wege*, *Holzwege*, and *Unterwegs*). Perone’s position has in fact the rigorous completeness not of a totalitarian system (to which he is for the most part opposed in his holding on to the fragment against all totalizations), but of a whole capable of keeping together opposite extremes according to the anti-Hegelian (which is also anti-Kierkegaardian) dialectics of the “neither this nor that,” which is also, he maintains, a “both this and that.” What ensues is a “dialectics of dangerous mediation,” as he refers to it in his two most recent books, *The Possible Present* and *La verità del sentimento* (The Truth of Sentiments). Perone’s style constantly returns to the same topics—the finite, reality, existence—but from different standpoints in order to save the multidimensionality of finite experience by bringing it back to a horizon of sense that needs to be found but also created anew every time. The double negative (neither this nor that) of Perone’s peculiar dialectics, which is also a double positive (both this and that), appears in his work as the image, which is also a conceptual category, of the “threshold.”

To the threshold of philosophy belong first of all the authors whom Perone engages in a sort of “lateral thinking” that calls such figures into question so as to rehabilitate and make central what, from the canonical perspective of the history of philosophy, has been less relevant in them: God in Feuerbach’s atheistic thinking, existence in Anselm’s ontological proof, the infinite in Descartes’ *cogito*, interruption in Schiller’s totality, secularization as a positive legacy in Bonhoeffer’s theological thinking, redemption in the instantaneity of Benjamin’s *Jetztzeit*, the self or I as that to which to return after the horrors of a history that we cannot escape in Celan’s poetry.

Mutated from Benjamin’s *Schwelle*, in its spatial as well as temporal features, Perone’s central category of the threshold indicates “not a line but a zone. At the same time, however, this zone that can be recognized only a posteriori, insofar as one has crossed it or has anticipated its crossing in the form of its imagination. Also, it cannot be inhabited but only crossed over. Finally, the one who perceives the threshold simultaneously dilates and deepens it” (*The Possible Present*, 16). In other words, the threshold joins while differentiating and differentiates while joining the here of immanence and the there of the beyond or transcendence, the inside of the

familial and the outside of alterity, the finite and the infinite, the before and the after, the origin and the end, the past and the future. Yet the threshold is neither this nor that, and therefore it is also this and that. It is what enables the passage, the move, the transformation, the overturning (again, a dialectical move) of the one into the other—not in the sense that the one becomes the other, but in the sense that every one always has its other, like reality, which always has its masks and shadows.

The threshold ultimately is the present, which one can never possess but in which one always is as the condition in which the finitude of existence unfolds and plays itself out. The threshold is the cipher of the finitude of the subject, and of the passions of the subject for its finitude, a subject who can only live in the present as a historical present pregnant with both the past (the past of memory) and the future (the future offered to us through narrations). In this cipher Perone's entire philosophy congeals: finitude, subjectivity, present, history, memory, and narration constitute the major themes of a philosophy whose meaning, both conceptually and chronologically, is better articulated through a metaphor and the titles of five of his books, namely, *Storia e ontologia* (*History and Ontology*), *Modernità e memoria* (*Modernity and Memory*), *Nonostante il soggetto* (*Despite the Subject*), *The Possible Present*, and *La verità del sentimento* (*The Truth of Sentiment*).

Struggling with the Angel—The metaphor that, by Perone's own admission, has inspired his entire thinking is that of Jacob's struggle with the angel recounted in the biblical book of Genesis. It is the image of the stranger who, in the desert night, interrupts Jacob's solitude and struggles with him in a fight that will end with neither winners nor losers. Only at dawn Jacob will find himself wounded by the angel. The wound will, however, also mean the blessedness of a new name—Israel. Jacob has fought with the angel and has not been killed, and God has fought with the human being and has not won. Rather, the fight by the finite, the fight *for the sake of* the finite has been blessed by the infinite with the recognition and affirmation of the finite through the new name. The struggle thus indicates resistance and tension, it is a resistance that institutes a tension—between the finite and the infinite, the human and the divine, earth and heaven, “the penultimate and the ultimate,” to use an expression proper to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, an important author for Perone.

What is relevant in the metaphor is that the benediction, that is, the confirmation of the finite in its finitude, occurs only after the struggle has been engaged, after the finitude has been defended. It is only in the struggle, after the struggle, that finitude constitutes itself as such—the new name means a recognition and an institution. That is to say, the finite can be proclaimed but also valued as such only in its confrontation with

the infinite, without which the finite also loses its value and relevance, philosophical as well as existential (as in the perspectives of nihilism and deconstruction, Perone argues). The wound—which is a trace and not presence—on Jacob's thigh is the mark of the infinite. The plenitude of the origin is not with or by the finite, Perone concludes; the struggle does not save the whole, it saves a part and leaves a scar; something to care for, to attend to, to be passionate about. Against the logic of the system, we do not have the whole; we only have the fragment, the finite. Yet, against the logic of dissolution, of nihilism, we do not only have the fragment, the nothing; we have the fragment that has been scarred by the whole; we have something. In this respect, Perone remains loyal to the teaching of Luigi Pareyson—according to whom “truth is interpretation,” but there is no interpretation unless it is an interpretation of the truth, as he states in his most famous work, *Verità e interpretazione* (Truth and Interpretation).

Perone's philosophy is this struggle with the angel, which demands that the something that the finite is—history, time, immediacy, the body (still a marginal theme in Perone's works)—be recognized and blessed without one's thereby becoming enslaved to the finite one wishes to protect. The titles of Perone's five major books (but they do not comprise all of his production) mark, philosophically and chronologically, the steps or stages of such a struggle.

History and Ontology—This is the (English) title of Perone's first important book, *Storia e ontologia*, a 1976 collection of five “essays on Bonhoeffer's theology.” The book is, however, much more than just an interpretation of Bonhoeffer. It is the, albeit still tentative, proposal of a specific philosophical position that considers history as the site of an ontology; that is to say, in a rather Hegelian and Heideggerian mood, history is the site in which being, the origin, the absolute gives itself. If this is the case, though, being too is traversed by the breaks and interruptions—in theological terms, the process of secularization—that characterize history. Being is not history, and history is not the origin. Yet, in order to grasp the meaning of history and refuse to abandon the historical events to the meaninglessness of their scattered existence, one has to refer to an ontology or to a whole as to the place from which we come but that we no longer are, and perhaps will never be. Being has undergone an interruption, being is fragmented, but the fragments are fragments of being. Both being and its masks are real.

It can no longer be the case, then, of the being of traditional metaphysics, that is, of an originary and unitary being; rather, it is a being that can be retrieved, if it can, only at the end and not at the origin, which is precluded to us. Ontology is thus an a posteriori ontology that is neither presupposed nor granted. It is within history that the search for such an

ontology unfolds itself. In this sense, Bonhoeffer's themes of the seriousness of secularization (which is the legacy that modernity leaves us), faithfulness to the earth, the imperative to live life in fullness *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there were no God), and the multidimensionality of being—all Nietzschean themes—assume an ontological and not simply ethical value. The finite in its multiplicity, what Bonhoeffer names “the penultimate,” that to which, in all honesty (*Redlichkeit*), secularization and modernity compel us today, is to be lived, protected, and fought for because it is where being gives itself. The so-called death of God, what in Bonhoeffer's terms appears as “the coming of age” of the world, is not an act of rebellion to God, thus demanding a condemnation; rather, it is the gift of God that makes human beings more human, that is, more finite, but also more capable of love—love of God in the entirety of God's multiple being, but also love of the finite in its multiple aspects.

Modernity and Memory—This is the (English) title of Perone's second important book, *Modernità e memoria*, published in 1987. The themes of the commitment to and engagement with the finite, which as Bonhoeffer's legacy had concluded the previous book, again take center stage. This time, though, the emphasis is on memory because, as the inscription on the cover page declares, “memory is the site where, in a finite manner, the interrupted sense of the whole is deposited.” On the background, as the given that cannot be neglected or dismissed, is the interruption that modernity brings about. Modernity is the age of secularization (Feuerbach, Bonhoeffer, Nietzsche), but also of fragmentations and breaks in the continuity of history and the tradition (Benjamin); in other words, it is the category of the *caesura* (a term utilized by Perone) that imposes itself as the most appropriate hermeneutic concept to understand modernity. Two options present themselves to philosophy: to abandon the fragments to themselves in a nihilistic drift, or to try to keep them together within some horizon of meaning. Perone chooses the latter, and there is no doubt that his is a thinking of the whole. But, as one learns by reading (Perone's reading of) Bonhoeffer, the whole is itself fragmented and discontinuous. Memory emerges then as the faculty through which the finite tries to hold on to the infinite. In the fragment that memory remembers, what memory in fact wishes to remember is not simply the fragment but the meaning of the fragment—that is, what is essential.

Following Benjamin, the sign of discontinuity under which the fragments are placed affects memory too. Perone writes, “we cannot, properly speaking, choose to remember. We can only choose to forget” (*Modernità e memoria*, 101), and even the knots on our handkerchiefs, through which, according to an Italian proverb recalled by Perone, we try to remind memory of its memorial task, are powerless as to the object—we forget

what we were supposed to remember. It is no longer the case, then, of the “emperor’s memory,” a memory capable of recollecting the whole thanks to its own totalizing abilities (whether as Hegel’s *Geist* in its process of *Er-innerung* or as Plato’s recollection of the plane of forms where all souls once have been). Memory is not repetition; rather, it is resistance—resistance for and on behalf of the finite that refuses being either swallowed in the continuity of a system or abandoned to complete meaninglessness and forgetfulness.

Memory does not create such a finite or it would be infinite memory; rather, in a Levinasian move, memory finds such a finite in front of itself as the other, as that which demands not to be forgotten. In this sense, memory is both passive (it receives) and active (it remembers), strong (it possesses the power to respond) and weak (it cannot grant the success of its action), finite (in its powerlessness) and metaphysical (in its faithfulness to a sense of the whole that memory sees present in the fragments for which it resists), tied to the past and projected toward the future. Yet the temporality of memory is the present, because it is in the present that it struggles so that the past may not be forgotten but may instead become a spark of redemption—the happiness that has not been could and should instead be. It is not a matter of having memories, but rather of making oneself memory. The burden then is on subjectivity.

Despite the Subject—The theme of the subject is at the center of Perone’s 1995 book, *Nonostante il soggetto*, which was translated into German in 1998. From the outset, Perone is aware of the “regressive aspect” (*Nonostante il soggetto*, 7) of writing a book on the subject today. And yet with courage and honesty that is precisely what he sets out doing, because despite the crisis of subjectivity, of which the various objections to the subject are a stage, the subject is all what we have. Despite the subject, then, we need to move beyond the subject not to abandon subjectivity but to reconfigure it according to new lines of thought. Herein lies the timeliness of Perone’s project and one of his anti-Heideggerian, anti-structuralist, and anti-deconstructionist traits.

What we are left with at the end of modernity (which Perone distinguishes from the modern, that is, from the historical period in which the secularization process is carried out and of which postmodernity is nothing except an epilogue), is a weakened, wounded subject, a subject that has undergone a separation from the origin (God or the metaphysical plenitude of the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions) and is therefore in need of protection, what Perone names “tenderness” toward the finite. It is a finite subject that configures itself through the categories of memory, interruption, desire, patience, attention that is care for the particular, humility, tenderness, and delay that lingers on the finite and thereby

prolongs it, as we read in a very agile little booklet, *Le passioni del finito* (The Passions of the Finite), in which Perone meditates on the experience of finitude and the infinite to which the finite inevitably refers. Ultimately, it is a subject that turns itself into memory, that is, makes itself a witness, and a testimony for the other, for a truth, and for an absolute that cannot be said but only revealed in a fact, a gesture, a word.

Of this kind is the subject from which to start so as to accomplish a vision of the whole that neither reduces itself to a system and a totality nor abandons the subject to its own fragmentation and dissolution (which is the other side of the same coin). The subject is thus also the starting point for reconquering a metaphysical standpoint. When we insist on the subject, we in fact discover that the subject is not the foundational site of the edifice of knowledge, as Descartes hoped; rather, the subject is a precarious site constantly manifesting its own inconsistency. Hence, unfathomable depths open up to it: first of all, God and the world, which cannot be reduced to the power of subjectivity, as both Descartes and the various critics of idealism realize.

There is no doubt that Perone's beginning is Cartesian. But his is a different subject and a different metaphysics than the ones offered by premodern and modern thought. Perone's subject and metaphysics have passed through the death of God and have taken it seriously—except they have not been destroyed, but rather strengthened, by such a divine death. And so has the divine itself, because the questions of the truth, being, and the infinite can only be posed meaningfully by a subject that is *there* to interrogate them. There—this means: here and now, in the present.

The Possible Present—We come to the present book, which, published in Italian in 2005, brings together all of Perone's major themes, and therefore constitutes a sort of a *summa* of his philosophy. The book opens with a critique of Heidegger, who has correctly understood how ecstatic temporality constitutes the fundamental dimension of existence, and yet inflected temporality in the direction of the future, that is, of the non-being (yet). Against Heidegger and the primacy of the future (the various "to-come" that also characterize Derrida's and Nancy's thinking), Perone vindicates the rights of the present as the proper dimension of finitude and the central dimension of temporality. In its past and future dimensions, time is at stake in the present, because it is within the present that past and future can give rise to a meaningful horizon of life and sense. The present assumes the characters of the threshold of which we spoke earlier; that is, the present is the temporal dimension that enables the difference but also the subsistence and continuity of past and future. The present in fact enables the past to achieve the consistency that allows it to be, and to be even for the future. For this saving activity, an attitude

toward the present is needed that does not simply master or repeat the present. Perone indicates hilarity, humility, generosity, and daydreaming as the ways (the virtues of passions) by which one is able to dwell in the present without becoming absorbed by or disappearing in the present.

If the present is threshold, and the present is the dimension of the subject, then the subject, that is, finite existence, is itself threshold, in-between, present that is never stable but always (*à la* Heidegger) on the way to its own becoming present. The I is then fundamentally narration, articulating the discrete nows of the present in the thread and continuity of a story, a tale of the I's becoming and coming to itself.

So it is also with philosophy, which is never the beginning, or at the beginning, but which is rather always after the fact and before the end, as that which tries to give a meaning to what it has encountered in front of itself, namely, reality. In this sense, philosophy as metaphysics is always metaphysics of the finite—what philosophy says is time, the present, the given, the positive. Philosophy says time (the finitude, the present) in order to give it time, to prolong time in the form of a consistent endurance. Philosophy does not simply say the present as is; it also says the present as it could and should possibly be. Philosophy is narration that saves.

The Truth of Sentiment—Perone's philosophy does not stop at its *summa*; rather, it goes on, because there are always more and new fragments of existence the meaning of which needs to be explored and recovered. Reality as object of wonder is what has caused the arousal of the metaphysical feeling par excellence, and hence philosophy. It is to feeling not as sensation, passion, or emotion but as metaphysical sentiment, that is, as sentiment about reality, that Perone devotes his most recent book, *La verità del sentimento* (2008).

Perone argues through a close engagement with Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Husserl, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Michel Henri, with their accentuations of feelings of doubt, anxiety, nausea, boredom, and so on, that philosophy has progressively dismissed feelings from its field of inquiry and from the realm of knowledge; it has banned them to the private or even irrational sphere, thus losing greater and greater sides of reality. Wonder, from which philosophy begins, is in fact "the thing's urging on the subject," Perone writes. In other words, wonder causes the subject to realize its exposure to the other that the world is and to acknowledge the subject's own relational character. But for such a realization, immediacy is necessary, whereas in the last epigones of thinking about sentiments, "the sentiment, which is born finite (wonder is the immediacy of something), gets to be overturned into being shrine of the infinite"; that is, it becomes perception of the unreachable character of the thing, and immediacy is no longer accessible.

Far from advocating the superiority of sentiment *tout court*, Perone argues for a nonsentimental retrieval of sentiment as metaphysical sentiment, and for a nonirrationalistic critique of the supremacy of reason, since both sentiment and reason, in their intertwining rather than their opposition, are two modalities of the same wonder for reality. “Whereas sentiment is wonder, reflection is the increase in wonder” (*La verità del sentimento*, 37).

Once again, Perone’s general philosophical ambition to save all sides of reality—immediacy and mediation, finite and infinite, sentiment and reason—makes itself explicit in the formulation of a “dialectics of mediation” that enables one meaningfully to approach the other by remaining first of all firm (but not fixed) on one’s own position because “mediation is not to overcome distance but rather to maintain distance so that proximity may appeal to me” (*La verità del sentimento*, 157). The self and the other in a distance that is the only way of their proximity: Jacob’s struggle with the angel, a struggle (a tension) that confirms both without eliminating either, proves to be the guiding metaphor through the metaphysical ambitions of Perone’s philosophy.

After the beginning, before the end—To do philosophy is to say the truth, but the truth, as Bonhoeffer has taught (at the beginning) and Perone teaches (before the end), is the protection of reality in its masks and contradictions not only as it is but also as it wishes to be or should be. Not only philosophy but also art, ethics, and, as Perone’s own engagement in such a field testifies, politics are all ways in which the finitude of reality in its proximity to the infinite can be said truthfully, that is, protectively. It is to such protection that Perone’s philosophy is devoted, after the beginning of such finite and before its end.

Like philosophy, like the metaphysical sentiment of which he writes most recently, in all his books Perone “wants everything and demands everything. . . . [He] is obsessed with the whole. Yet the whole . . . does not have the extension of a totality but rather the intensity of the fragment in which the whole is at stake” (*La verità del sentimento*, 174). It is to the whole that, as a fragment, *The Possible Present* bears witness.

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