Thinking the Inexhaustible
Art, Interpretation, and Freedom in the Philosophy of Luigi Pareyson

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Thinking the Inexhaustible
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We are, as always, indebted to Andrew Kenyon and the staff at SUNY Press for their enthusiastic backing of this volume and their unfailing support of the Series in Contemporary Italian Philosophy.

We also extend our most sincere appreciation to the contributors of this volume for their excellent work and patience. Without them this work would not have been possible.

It is noteworthy that the publication of this volume occurs during the centennial of Luigi Pareyson’s birth. May this timing be an auspicious testimony to and gesture of appreciation for the significance of his philosophical thought.
in it all "ground" disappears. Again, is this Kant read from Schelling's perspective? And how could it be different for Pareyson?

—Translated by Silvia Benso

NOTE


Pareyson’s Aesthetics as Hermeneutics of Art

Federico Vercellone

BEYOND BENEDETTO CROCE
AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF ART

Luigi Pareyson’s extensive confrontation with aesthetics concerns especially the first stage of his philosophy, even if one could say that Pareyson never abandoned art as a continuous point of interest of his theoretical reflection.

If one wanted to summarize the trajectory of Pareyson’s thought within aesthetics, one could describe it, albeit with some degree of ambiguity, as a move from a hermeneutics of art to a hermeneutics of myth. The consideration of the literary tradition always remained central in Pareyson’s thinking, though, especially with reference to some great authors and novelists, first of all, Dostoevsky.

In any event, Pareyson’s aesthetics anticipates, with extreme lucidity and well in advance, what later will become a European phenomenon, namely, the end of the period, which started with German Romanticism, of aesthetics as philosophy of art, as specific delimitation of a wider metaphysical orientation that is universal not only because of its meaning but also because of its latitude, of its encompassing and omni-comprehensive features. This occurs in Pareyson through his proposal, in Estetica. Teoria della formativita [Aesthetics: Theory of Formativity], of an aesthetic
model that is alien to the traditional structure of the philosophy of art and instead places aesthetics in a very close connection with hermeneutics. This is the really distinct, original, and innovative standpoint from which to grasp the meaning of Pareyson’s reflection within the contemporary scenario and especially the relevance of such a significant work as his Estetica. Pareyson’s aesthetics calls into question the classic structure, of Romantic and Hegelian making, of nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetics that under close analysis persists until Adorno. The reason why Pareyson’s aesthetic theory can accomplish such a meaningful move is that it thematizes the relation between aesthetics and hermeneutics.

Pareyson’s Estetica, which was published by various presses, from Istituto di Filosofia to Sansoni to Bompiani, appeared in print in 1954 but underwent various revised editions until the last one, in 1988. The interest in aesthetics remained the central focus in Pareyson’s thinking for about twenty years, from after World War II until the mid-1960s. After that time, Pareyson increasingly turned toward ethical and religious themes.

At the center of Pareyson’s aesthetics is the idea of formativity. As he states from the start, in the background of his position is the teaching of Augusto Guzzo. For Guzzo, human life is to be understood as an “invention of forms.” Formativity is a concept that does not pertain only to the aesthetic sphere; rather, it concerns spiritual life in its complexity. We are thus confronted with a theory that studies formativity within the whole spiritual life and indicates, within all human operations, the formative feature that makes such operations be simultaneously a kind of production and of invention. In other words, each operation “makes” while inventing “the way of making”; that is, it succeeds in “realizing” or actualizing only by proceeding by trials toward its success and thus producing works that are “forms.”

For Pareyson, art thus derives from the development of a formativity that pervades all human activities. A sort of nixus formativus [formative drive] permeates nature itself. What emerges here is an accentuation of Goethe’s influence, which by Pareyson’s own admission is absolutely central to this stage of his thought (such an influence will diminish in the later Pareyson also in relation to a changed cultural climate, to a changed thinking environment that does not deem to seek its center in a morphological perspective). Within this framework, the centrality of the morphological perspective, for the most part shared also by Schelling in his “philosophy of identity” (another reference figure for Pareyson at this time), widens the spectrum of artistic meanings in the direction of nature and poiesis and thus enables a shift in the traditional focus of aesthetic considerations. Pareyson’s position already implies a critique of the notion of an autonomous aesthetic consciousness, a critique that takes form and configuration well ahead of Hans-Georg Gadamer’s similar criticism. Moreover, Pareyson takes his reader in a different direction than Gadamer: he leads the reader in the direction of a critique of aesthetic consciousness that does not principally concern the question of its relation with historical consciousness, as is the case in Truth and Method. On this path, whose prelude is Goethe, art precedes historical consciousness and exhibits its own autonomy as an originary, almost primal event. For Pareyson in the Estetica, art derives “from the intentional and programmatic accentuation of an activity that is present in all human activities and that accompanies, even constitutes, any manifestation of human industriousness.” In the same vein, Pareyson continues: “What we properly name ‘art’ is ‘formativity,’ that is, a ‘making’ that while it makes invents ‘its way of making’: production that is simultaneously and indissolubly invention. All aspects of human industriousness, from the simplest to the most complex, have an ineliminable and essential feature of formativity.” This claim constitutes the premise to recognize and underline the absolutely philosophical character of aesthetics. The exquisitely philosophical nature of this discipline prevents the characterization of aesthetics as “second” philosophy in comparison to the consideration of ground to which “first” philosophy would instead be devoted, according to the classical tradition that has dominated the philosophy of art.

With respect to this point, Pareyson asserts that, “first of all, aesthetics is not a part of philosophy but the whole philosophy that is focused on the questions of beauty and art; secondly, the concrete questions of aesthetics do not cease being philosophical by virtue of their being particular...” Rather, one could say that aesthetics is a happy example of the meeting point of the two ways of philosophical reflection, namely, the way upward, which draws universal results from the meditation on concrete experience, and the way downward, which uses such universal results to interpret experience and solve its problems.

The viewpoint that Pareyson is here unfolding—and it is one of the main tenets of his thought—is anti-Hegelian even before being anti-Croccean. In some aspects, it recalls the position of Giovanni Gentile, from whom art “is always a moment or aspect of the fulfilled actual synthesis of Spirit,” constantly overcoming itself and reemerging in the framework of a cyclical proceeding.

Formativity and therefore art constitute some anthropological and ontological constants that do not depend on any kind of historical
maturation. From this perspective, following Pareyson yet certainly somewhat pushing his thought in a direction left unaddressed by him, one could even claim that the autonomy of art rests on the evolution of living beings and precedes the properly cultural development of the human species. In any event and leaving aside this extemporaneous consideration, Pareyson continually stresses the feature of "making" that belongs to artistic creation. His reference to the artist's awareness opposes, following Paul Valéry, the Platonic motif of the artist's inspiration and conversely emphasizes the extent to which the artwork is, as it were, its own guide in its pursuit of its formative goal.

Considerations of this kind of course relativize the notion of aesthetic consciousness as a necessary factor in the identification of artistic objects. With Pareyson, we are beyond the "death of art" and the notion of l'art pour l'art that constitutes the necessary premise thereof. For Hegel, the historical maturation of the spiritual content brings art to a necessary decline and death, at least in terms of art's ability to constitute the climax of a certain culture. Conversely, Pareyson leads us to look at things in a profoundly different manner. As already indicated earlier, for Pareyson art is the specification of a more universal "formativity" that is in itself independent from historical, or historico-metaphysical, variables.

On the ground of this approach, Pareyson finds himself in the position to elaborate a concept of dynamic form that allows him to come into direct contact with the indeterminacy of the form. This presages the notion of an "open work" later developed by Umberto Eco. This intuition of Pareyson's is absolutely fundamental because it draws him near to contemporary art and allows him to build an aesthetics that cannot be mistaken for some variety of poetics. His aesthetics thus is neither partisan nor sectarian and yet it works without the major categorial invariants that characterize classic aesthetics. Instead of such traditional categorial invariables, Pareyson's aesthetics insists on the process of work formation and on the articulation of the rule that presides over such a work. This aesthetics proposes the work and the process of its formation ahead of all categorial features. It orients itself toward the work as its epicenter and does so with a remarkable awareness of the relevance of aesthetics as the discipline structuring the philosophical reflection on art.

In this context, it is perhaps helpful to recall that the critical attitude toward Benedetto Croce, an attitude that values the dynamism of form, is prepared by Lionello Venturi, a great art historian who, like Pareyson, is also an anti-fascist. In any event, it is Pareyson's dynamic conception of form that enables him to articulate his confrontation with Croce. The rejection of the immediate, non-process-based identity of the relation between intuition and expression will be, as already mentioned, the step that enables Pareyson to engage a conversation with contemporary art.

If we now move to Croce, we may want to recall that for him, any real intuition, that is, any successful intuition, is expression. Between the two there is complete correspondence. In his 1902 Estetica, Croce claims that "every real intuition or representation is, at the same time, expression. That which is not objectified in an expression is neither intuition nor expression but sensation and naturalness. Spirit only intuits when making, shaping, expressing. Those who separate intuition from expression are never ever able to join them again." In this context, the move is in a direction that exalts formal success and, with formal success, beauty that cannot be distinguished from success. Croce emphasizes this a few paragraphs after the abovementioned quotation. With this, we approach one of the crucial issues not only in Croce's 1902 Estetica but in his entire reflection on this topic. He writes: "In the aesthetic act, expressive activity is not added to the fact of impressions; on the contrary, impressions are elaborated and formed by expressive activity. They reappear in expression, as it were, like water that is put through a filter and that, on the other side of the filter, reappears both as the same and different. The aesthetic act is therefore form and nothing else than form."

We are here confronted with a work of transferal that leaves no residues. The beautiful has to be understood as successful expression and the ugly as unsuccessful expression. In this work of transferal of intuition into expression, which is the source of lyricism by means of feeling, there is a complete absence of all process elements, of all dynamic components in the process of structuring or forming the work of art. Pareyson's criticism of Croce, whether explicit or implicit, is to be placed within this context. His conception of dynamic form allows Pareyson to advance beyond Croce on several accounts. First, Pareyson is able to value the path toward the form itself in its various stages, which therefore become themselves meaningful. Second, on this path, elements that Croce had excluded, such as cues, materials, and techniques, become important when evaluating a work of art. On this ground, there occurs also an implicit opening toward the possibility of a critique of variants. Third, on the ground of a dynamic conception of form, the connection of form and interpretation becomes also possible. Thus, and fourth, one can recognize the intrinsic rather than extrinsic meaning of factors such as execution or performance, reception, critique, historicity, and even the patina (as in Brandi) for the consideration of the work of art. This enables Pareyson to advance the idea of an aesthetic of production without underestimating
all the features that have to do with what one can broadly name “the fruition” of the work of art. The consideration and the importance of the productive moment are mitigated by the motifs of interpretation and reception in the context of an extremely balanced and pondered theoretical construct.

Crucial for Pareyson is the element of invention, of trial through which the work of art is made. Pareyson repeatedly underlines that formal invention has a character of experiment and research. As he writes,

It is evident that success presupposes a making that must also be invention of the way of making. Whatever the work to be made, the way of making it is not known ahead of time and with evidence; rather, one must discover and find it, and only after one has discovered and found it will one clearly realize that that was precisely the way in which the work had to be done. In order to discover and find how one must make it, one must proceed by trials, that is, by figuring and inventing various possibilities [. . .] until one finally arrives at the discovery of the only one possibility that the operation itself required at that point in order to be finished and successful. Once discovered, that possibility reveals itself as the one that one knew one had to find.

To form is essentially to try because forming consists of inventiveness capable of figuring multiple possibilities and at the same time of finding among them the only good one, the one that is necessary for successfulness. Trials extend to the entire spiritual life, and affect all areas of human laboriousness. This confirms that their domain is the same as the domain of formativity because all spiritual life is formativity. Certainly this destiny of human beings, the fact of not being able to operate except by proceeding by trials, is the mark of human misery and greatness at the same time—human beings cannot find without searching, and they cannot search except that by making attempts; yet in trying they figure and invent so that what they find is what they have, truly, invented.\(^{19}\)

From this perspective, unlike Croce, Pareyson accepts entering what we could call “the artist’s workshop.” He accepts the recognition that practice, cues, and even improvisation are central elements in the consideration and evaluation of a work of art. Pareyson can also emphasize that matter and technique should not be understood separately from the

work; rather, they are integral parts of its formation. Without naming it explicitly, Pareyson takes thus part in a debate started a few years earlier in 1951 by the art historian Giulio Carlo Argan with his work Walter Gropius e la Bauhaus.\(^{20}\)

**ART AND INTERPRETATION**

As the outcome of a path that is open and yet predisposed by a law that is itself intrinsic in the becoming and making of the work, art is indissolubly tied to interpretation. Art is tied to interpretation on the side of both the artist who creates it and the interpreter who enjoys it. Interpretation occurs insofar as its object is a form and its subject is a person. Constitutive of the human being as person is a kind of knowledge that is given through interpretation. It is a “multiple and infinite” knowledge.\(^{21}\)

Interpretation is grounded on a dynamic consideration of the form, which confronts itself with the work of art in its mobile morphological unity. What this consideration, simultaneously hermeneutic and morphological, of the work of art presides is the notion of the hermeneutic circle, which will be articulated in a different context by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. In a passage that refers to mutilated works but that can be expanded to the whole of aesthetic theory, Pareyson claims that “it is true that the whole can only be grasped by grasping its parts, because the whole is manifested through their connection. Yet this tie that binds the parts is not external to any of them; rather, it is the irradiation of each part from the whole, so that the deep intention of the one who explores the parts so as to grasp the whole is to see the whole that is present in each part, requires each of them, and connects all of them together . . . The issue is that of finding the form through a dynamic consideration, which grasps the whole while it reclaims its own parts and sees the parts while it responds to the appeal of the forming form.\(^{22}\)

It is the operative effectiveness of the form, which presides over the self-structuring of the work, that guides interpretation and puts the artist in contact with the consumer ([fruitore], thereby making both of them participants in a single creative process.\(^{23}\) What we have here is an interpretation (and this constitutes a fundamental intuition that deeply differentiates Pareyson from Gadamer) that conjoins artist and consumer and thus activity and passivity.\(^{24}\) In this context, the relation between subject and object of interpretation escapes all possibilities of
objectification on either side: “The known is a form and the knower is a person.”

The burden, and as it were the “historical” responsibility of interpretation, does not lie exclusively in its Wirkungsgeschichte, in the “history of effects”; rather, it concerns also its realization and successfulness. In this context there emerges the interpreter’s responsibility that, joined with the primacy of personhood, impresses an ethical mark on the act of interpretation. On this ground, aesthetic cognition assumes a universal meaning: Knowledge as a whole, and not only knowledge of the work of art, is now to be understood as “non-disjoinable synthesis of activity and passivity” and thus as “interpretation.” Interpretation, in which what is at stake is not only the understanding but also the successfulness of the work, is continuously subject to the risk of failure. This is a risk that constitutes (and this would be entirely unacceptable for Croce) a motive of the realization itself of the work deriving from a process of self-interpretation of its own forming form.

Furthermore, Pareyson claims that any kind of knowledge that does not have an objectifying character, that does not derive from an epistemological attitude “that defines and constructs its object,” has an interpretative nature. This kind of knowledge is constantly exposed, as said above, to the risk of not being successful, that is, of encountering the double limitation “of incomprehension and incomprehensibility.” Precisely here, however, is the richness of interpretative knowledge, which works in such a way that the form is regarded “in a very determinate perspective that casts light on it in a determinate manner,” while in the unmistakable determinacy of form, aspects and perspectives are infinite.” From here emerge both the possibility and the necessity of “infinite possible interpretations,” so that knowledge is characterized by an inexhaustible richness that originates from the encounter between interpreter and interpreted form. The work thus actualizes itself also in the course of the interpretative process that involves, as we have seen, both the artist and the interpreter, who is also a participant in the creative process.

Pareyson introduces the idea that “regarding things as ‘persons’ entails the impossibility of reducing persons to ‘things,’” and thus he accentuates the ethical aspect inherent in his aesthetic viewpoint. This aspect is in conformity with the perspective of ontological personalism Pareyson espouses especially in his earlier years. Pareyson also adds that one cannot know things except by “personifying” them, thereby restoring them to their life and independence.

Within this framework, Pareyson offers many remarkable suggestions having to do with an analysis of the act of reading understood as an act of participation in the rule constitutive of the work. Years later, this Pareysonian orientation, perhaps derived from Valéry, finds additional important developments in Wolfgang Iser’s aesthetics of reception. Thinking about the act of reading, Iser emphasizes the character of indeterminacy of the literary text. For Pareyson, perhaps with a Schlegelian resonance, to read means “to master the work itself rendering it present and lively, that is, making its effect work.” Additionally, the work of art always requires its execution or performance, which constitutes an essential element of it. The execution/interpretation in fact warrants that the multiplicity and infinity of the work do not contradict but rather legitimate and strengthen the identity of the work. In this context, historical or cultural distance does not constitute an obstacle to the understanding of the work, according to the perspective that is developed otherwise by Gadamer in Truth and Method through the notion of the “fusion of horizons.” There can be no historical or cultural distance capable of annihilating the content, the relevance of the work, the possibility of enjoying and actualizing it. This possibility of interpretation should not be utilized ad libitum [at liberty] but rather should constantly be exercised within the watchful bind dictated by the forming form that is at work in the work.

The account of the further maturation of an aesthetic thinking that renders Pareyson one of the most fecund figures in the realm of the aesthetics of the second half of the twentieth century is not a matter that can be taken up here. Although with different accentuations than at its beginning, this maturation occurred through the elaboration of a hermeneutic theory that turns Pareyson into one of the masters of contemporary hermeneutics; it also occurred through the proposal of a “tragic thought” that finds in a novelist-philosopher such as Dostoevsky one of its fundamental figures of reference. There is no doubt, however, that the turn in the direction of “tragic thought” interrupts the morphological unity of Pareyson’s thinking and introduces instead an unbridgeable hiatus between ground and its consequences, between forming form and formed form. The happy harmony and unity that Pareyson had admired in Goethe’s position and in Schelling’s philosophy of identity is interrupted in his elaboration of “tragic thought.” What is attained instead is a less confident and more embittered philosophy that no longer admits of elements of continuity between the invisible ground and the forms of the visible.

—Translated by Silvia Benso
NOTES


4. For what concerns the sequence of Pareyson’s lecture courses and his historiographic and theoretical production within the field of aesthetics, see Francesco Tomatis, Pareyson: Vita, filosofia, bibliografia (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2003), 69–71.


6. Ibid., 8.

7. This is what Pareyson remarks, several years afterward, in the notes published under the title “La natura tra estetica e ontologia,” in his Essere, libertà, ambiguità (Milan: Mursia, 1998), 112–13: “When I was young I was fascinated by this conception/erotic Goethian many years many courses. Yet I perceived that something was missing, because it did not take into account the fact that human activities are tentative, and that the artist’s operation is an adventure whose outcome one does not know, and the work begins to exist only once it has been made. . . . I derived a theory while intending to remain faithful to Goethe’s spirit . . . but I had to give it an extremely subtle development, and this cost me a search for constant recalibrations so as to keep things in balance and not let one part predominate.” The courses on Goethe and Schelling are now part of Luigi Pareyson, Estetica dell’idealismo tedesco III: Goethe e Schelling, ed. M. Ravera (Milan: Mursia, 2003).


10. Ibid., 18.

11. Ibid., 15.


13. This is what is suggested by Winfried Menninghaus, Worx Kunst? Ästhetik nach Darwin (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2011).


18. Ibid., 31.


22. Ibid., 113.

23. Ibid., 141.

24. See also Pareyson, Estetica, 180–81.

25. Ibid., 180.

26. Ibid., 182.

27. Ibid., 186.

28. Ibid., 187.

29. Ibid., 187.

30. Ibid., 188–89.

31. Ibid., 208.

32. Ibid., 208.


35. Pareyson, Estetica, 223.