RESPONSE TO UGO PERONE

UGO PERONE’S PHILOSOPHY AT THE THRESHOLD:
SPACE, TIME AND (SIMULATED) POLITICAL LIFE

Robert T. Valgenti (Lebanon Valley College)

I am grateful to Antonio Calcagno and Silvia Benso for inviting me to be part of this panel dedicated to “Encountering Italian Philosophy.” Moreover, it is my pleasure and honour to respond to the thinking of Ugo Perone, a philosopher who is not only a product of, but who has helped to shape and develop, the intellectual landscape of my adopted philosophical home of Torino, Italy.

This common background is not, however, without its inherent problems. Perhaps the difficulty with this shared horizon involves the possibility that this encounter in the present, an encounter with the work and the person himself, is in danger of not being an encounter at all: I wonder if it is even possible to read his work and experience his thinking without tracing certain familial lines in the visage of his ideas, without responding almost instinctively to the familiar tone in his philosophical voice, like meeting a cousin for the first time later in life, an individual who exists only in name, that symbolic person in front of the person. If we were to meet neither here in this room nor merely in the textual encounter, but instead in Torino, in front of Palazzo Nuovo, or in the middle of Piazza San Carlo, or on the platform at Porta Nuova, what would stand forth and remain beyond the shared landmarks, the friends in common, and the congeniality of space? What has been cleared out by the recognisable features and the shared connections—biological and historical—and thus prepared a revelatory opening for this new place and this new time? How do we overcome the threat of the familiar and prepare for something truly new?

One typical response would claim that the desire to encounter something beyond that always-already open horizon is precisely the problem. Namely, that a shared horizon is the very condition for the encounter, such that engaging and recognising difference is made possible
only through its separation from an initial recognition of sameness. If this were the case, however, _niente sarebbe in gioco_—nothing would be at stake—in this encounter. Simply reversing the terms, so that the recognition of sameness relies on a prior condition of difference, cannot in any case account for the occasion(s) that bring us together, whether they arise simply from fate or from the machinations of those wishing to promote Italian philosophy abroad. Neither option appears adequate to the task of making this encounter, any encounter, truly _present_—a presentation in the fullest sense. One might nonetheless concede that if the new is possible at all, there must be a certain kindredness (_congenialità_, as Perone’s teacher Luigi Pareyson would say) at work, but a kindredness that is instituted in the very moment of the event, a presencing as a making-kindred and thus a bringing into existence. One could also think of Nietzsche here, who, perhaps, has most powerfully formulated the originally new through his figure of the “free spirit,” the one no longer burdened by history and the spirit of revenge.

Under this introductory and far too cursory rubric of questions, I would like to highlight the aspects of spatiality and temporality that characterise Perone’s understanding of the present in the figure of the “threshold” (_la soglia_). In particular, I want to respond to the notion of the “political present” for the precise reason that it erupts forth in the

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1 Luigi Pareyson (1918–91) was professor at the University of Turin and, along with Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, is one of the most important post-Heideggerian hermeneutic thinkers. Among his most important works are _Esistenza e persona_ (1950); _Estetica: Teoria della formatività_ (1954); _Verità e interpretazione_ (1971) and _Ontologia della libertà_ (1995). On the interpretative character of truth, Pareyson states: “...a formulation of truth can be communicated solely through sympathy, kindredness, and elective affinity. It cannot rely on a presupposed universality, as would a previous impersonal reason or a given historical community; rather, it relies on the unifying and diffusive force of truth, namely on that unicity and universality of the true which becomes valuable within every single formulation as the appeal to freedom rather than the constriction to evidence, as the demand for communion and dialogue rather than as a respect for habitual conventions. The notion of a pre-existing universality is replaced by a universality to be established, a universality that becomes possible only by instituting a community of kindred persons, brought together by a similar interpretation of truth, and precisely for that reason able to understand and communicate reciprocally.” _Verità e interpretazione_ (Milano: Mursia, 1971), 87.
moment and is always at risk—a space in danger of collapsing in upon itself if our “sense for the whole” neither understands nor undertakes the careful attention that such a tenuous event demands. I will begin, therefore, with a question: What is placed at risk in the public space?

A response to this question is possible if we first consider the nature of this space as one opened up by politics rather than one in which politics merely happens. One of the fundamental claims of Perone’s paper, a claim that I will return to later in all of its splendid positivity, proposes that “The political actually does not exist…. It exists only as an invention.” Furthermore, “The political, as we intend it…is a way of living, interpreting, and regulating the collective actions, placing them within a common space and time.” Thus, politics does not have a space of its own prepared by historical or material conditions external to it; politics is a way of being for humans, and the public space arises in and through this way of being. Politics thus acts as a transcendental condition for a particular way of human being. What we refer to as the public space neither extends nor contradicts what appears antithetically as the private space; rather, what unfolds on the basis of politics and through the public space is a particular declination of the I.

One particular declination of the I in its shared life with others is that which, in its negative and positive forms, has been gathered under the increasingly popular heading of “biopolitics.” And as Perone correctly suggests, the threat and/or hope of our biopolitical reality does not arise from the mechanisms that reduce us to “bare life” or include us in calculations that benefit the mass of society with little regard for the individual; rather, it arises more originarily from life itself. Life, in Perone’s view, moreover, cannot simply be reduced to an object at our disposal, whether for research or for exploitation, as these mechanisms are not equal to life and are “more fragile than life.” Life does not wait in “standing reserve” to be mobilized into political form, that is, it is not merely ready-at-hand to be placed at risk when the time arises. If that were the case, one would need to presuppose a realm where life waits to transform into political space, a flow of time silent and latent, yet waiting to emerge from its slumber so that it can leap into political action. Life, along with space and time, would need to be essentialised in order to make sense of this sort of political world unfolding before us. Thus, following Heidegger’s ontological critique of presence, traditional metaphysics seems unfit for the challenge of our guiding question. A suitable
answer is also lacking in those rejections of metaphysics that would derive finitude, and thus a notion of the present, from a continual mining of the past and/or the empirical realm in order to articulate an anticipation of a humanity yet to come. If there is a metaphysics of the present for Perone, it might look something like—to once again mention Pareyson—an “ontology of the inexhaustible”2 that reveals the finitude of the present by formulating and interpreting a potentially infinite number of public spaces through the always personal and always singular interpretations of the totality of its members.

Life can therefore never be given to us as such, but must always already appear in the public space, and thus in politics, as a living-together, as something already mediated through the political. In this mediation, life opposes the basic mechanism of survival that normally establishes its limit. Only through the invention of the public space does life place itself in jeopardy in the encounter with that which is never sufficient to it, that which can never be reduced to the “domain of immanence.” In rather short order, then, it seems we have come to an answer to my guiding question: life is put at risk (indeed, places itself at risk) when a public space is opened. To be political is to suspend the order of survival and place life itself at risk through the creation of a public space. The public space is where truly human life lives or dies.

Human life, the bios politikos, is a particular declination of the I, a way of being for individuals whereby the mere demands of survival are suspended and life itself is placed at risk. In the book The Possible Present,3 Perone develops a thorough reflection upon the figure of the threshold, declining it both in terms of time and space as “the present”—that which discriminates, which is the point of separation, and which even connotes a “critical moment” or “dangerous situation.” In this figure of the threshold we find a powerful articulation of what it means to be a human being and for such a being to be present in all of its possible-

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2 The idea that the truth of interpretation possesses an infinite “ulteriority” (ulteriorità) of formulations and is thus inexhaustible is central to Pareyson’s hermeneutics: “The only way to grasp all of the truth is to possess it as inexhaustible, in its surging and originarity, from the very source of continual renewal; not in one of its impossible, total pictures, but in a determinate perspective that is “sided” without being “one-sided,” and thus not in need of integration since it is already a totality in itself.” Verità e interpretazione, 76.

3 Ugo Perone, Il presente possibile (Napoli: Guida, 2005).
ties—neither one being or the other, but always present at the point of inception and transition. In terms of its spatiality, it is above all the threshold of the home, which separates the inside from the outside, the intimate and private from the communal and the public, a separation that is also mirrored in the interiority and externality of the soul and the body. But the threshold is not a static construction, a place that one discovers or crosses after the fact, as if it were always already there, or even an unchanging given. The threshold is a founding event that institutes the very separation into two, bringing two realms or dimensions into being, rather than acting as a moment that merely derives the one from the other, and in some sense, relies on the prior possession of one, if not both, terms. And yet, the threshold as an event, as the institution of a separation is nothing that can merely be possessed or held completely within one’s own control. The spatiality of the threshold, the spatial realm opened up by and through the threshold, is not equal to the event, as it works always through a presumed possession. The threshold is precisely that which I cannot simply have.

In terms of its temporality, the threshold “is always the perception of a temporality in which I am not.” Thus, the structural character of the threshold is always one of escape and evasion, of never being mine yet always being for me. One does not place oneself within the threshold; rather, the threshold instills itself in the individual, and yet is never there at one’s disposal. The present is thus a threshold between past and future. Never a present moment simply at our disposal, it is a precarious moment and a point of crossing and overturning. It is not a point in time, and yet it is a present that abides and remains: “The secret of the present is the force of non-being that wants to be.” Temporally, the threshold is the separation of past and future through a sort of genesis, a bringing into being not of any one object or moment, but simply the “bringing” itself. The moments of the present are not ineffable, as Pareyson might say, but, like Being itself, are unobjectifiable and always on their way toward ulterior formulations.

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4 Ibid., 37.
5 Ibid., 45.
6 "...truth is originary, and as such, unobjectifiable, more present in thought as source and origin than present to thought as the object of discovery—so ulterior as not to identify itself with any one of the perspectives that reveals and formu-
One could now add that finite human life, understood through the characteristics of the threshold, is placed at risk in the public space not as essentialised “life” at our disposal, but as life engaged in an ongoing narrative of the present—as subject, as writer, as audience. However, the individual life is never fully or authoritatively any one of these. Plagued by uncanniness or homelessness (die Unheimlichkeit), caught in a world that has become a fable, always already in gioco, both player and played, one finds that it is not merely physical life that is placed at risk; rather, the finite life that is placed at risk is the human life that institutes, constructs, interprets and discriminates. One cannot simply equate the finite with the physical. As Perone argues: “[T]he body that is the center of interest remains in every case the body of a human and for a human, that which is not only Körper, mere physicality, but Leib, the body that belongs to me.”7 The body, in this full sense, is first and foremost a threshold. Thus, there is no simple split between a lived-life and body—bios and zoe—as each one relies on an essentialisation that places the individual outside of one zone or the other rather than within the moment of their division and discrimination. To be placed at risk and to be brought into question is, under the rubric of the threshold, the fundamental ontological state for the human being. The human is, in a sense (to modify Heidegger’s claim from Being and Time), that being for whom being-a-threshold is a question in the first place. To recognise the threshold, always astride the infinitely possible declinations of the I, is to be human.

Where or when (as best these questions can be asked given the nature of the threshold) is finite human life placed at risk? Given Perone’s depiction of the threshold as a fluid realm of being, one should not be surprised that, as the title of Perone’s paper suggests, the metaphor par excellence for the public space—the town square—undergoes a powerful revision. As a negative space, the town square or piazza is a remainder which comes into being through the construction of the singular

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7 Il presente possibile, 39.
buildings that flank it and give rise to it. The town square, as a threshold, is the modification or even a lateralisation of the public space, one that aptly captures the sense of an “elsewhere” capable of opening up a world precisely by not being a part of that world (or any world for that matter). The town square can be timely and “attuale,” capable of bringing a revolution in time, precisely by not belonging to our time (or, once again, to any time). Where and when does the search for such a threshold begin?

Outside of this philosophical discourse about transcendentals and conditions of possibility, and within the idiom of the current and pervasive computer technology of our age, one might refer to a figure such as the “threshold” as an “interface.” An interface invents and creates a separation, and thus is political by virtue of the fact that it opens up a new “way of life” that distinguishes itself from the needs of bare life. In this regard, the new paradigm of interactivity via the Internet raises profound questions concerning the status of the political, especially given the novelty of its transformative notions of space and time, and more recently, the way technology has allowed revolutionary elements to circumvent and undermine government restrictions on public discourse. How should we understand the threshold, the interface, between our flesh-and-blood world (itself an abstraction) and the virtual or simulated worlds we might encounter as users of the Internet? To what degree does such a division and point of discrimination mirror the separation already articulated through the metaphor of the threshold?

I do not believe that one needs to think ahead to a future when there might be the possibility of a truly “virtual” reality, where the mind and body are hard-wired into a simulated environment so that the user sees, feels and experiences reality as if she were really there. At a much more basic and currently available level, a simulated world environment, such as “Second Life,” is a virtual online space where a person assumes an “avatar” or visual representation of herself, which engages in a variety of simulated interactions with other users who have also taken on simulated personae or “avatars.” In such a simulated world, one can meet other people, attend a seminar on business ethics or retirement savings, buy virtual property, have a virtual job, and even engage (so I am told) in all of the traditional vices. One might simply dismiss such a simulated reality as a form of escapism, a place where individuals can (for better or for worse) take on a new persona and, in a rather derivative way, become someone new. I would contend, however, that a simulated world is nei-
ther a copy, nor an extension, nor a contradiction of the “real world”; rather, as I want to suggest only briefly, it opens up a declination of the I, a way of being that steps beyond the limits of mere physical survival. It is the opening up of a political present, and in this sense, it provides a rich opportunity for an encounter with Perone’s thinking.

Let me first clarify what might be some of the mistaken presuppositions about the simulated “life” of an Internet user, and in particular, how such “life” might be placed at risk given the possibility of a new political space and time. First and foremost, one should resist the temptation to think there is something private about one’s use of the Internet—namely, that alone in the study, hidden behind the veil of the screen, one is removed from the public space. The reality, of course, is that on the Internet one has entered a panoptical world where every move is traced and recorded, often by those who wish to remain hidden. A second presupposition concerns those who wish to trace our every move: while it is certainly exciting (in a conspiratorial sense) to think that “Big Brother” is watching, in reality one is more likely being watched by “little brother,” by the innumerable public and private interests that stand to gain by gathering our personal information and observing our behaviours, and thus spend a lot of time doing so.\(^8\) The final, and perhaps most important presupposition, regards the erroneous distinction we often make between the virtual/simulated world and the “real world” where I am supposedly sitting and somehow controlling what I do in the new virtual space and time. One too readily assumes that the individual in the “real world” is the causal agent who shapes the actions of the avatar in the simulated world, rather than the other way around. But considering the interface between the real and the simulated world as a threshold, I want to suggest that the technology itself gives rise to new possibilities that direct the action on both sides of the divide, much in the same way that individual lives and actions are often compelled (in spite of the will) by the threshold of the body, and politically, by the threshold of the public space.

\(^8\) On the subject of “little brother,” I am indebted to the provocative presentation given at Lebanon Valley College on October 8, 2009, by Joshua Fairfield of Washington and Lee University, entitled “Escape into the Panopticon: Virtual Worlds and the Surveillance Society.”
It seems that the current biopolitical paradigms—and here I will only mention the names of Giorgio Agamben, Roberto Esposito and Antonio Negri—might not be adequate to thinking the challenge of the political understood through the metaphor of the threshold, and in particular, the political possibilities engendered by simulated-world technologies. On the one hand, the more negative rendering of biopolitics might see life placed at terrible risk due to the various states of exception made possible through technologies of surveillance on the Internet—that we are all reduced rather easily to *hominès sacri* who, by entering this world, forfeit the rights that might protect us in the so-called real world, and are further reduced to calculation within the world of commerce and production. On the other hand, the more positive possibilities envisioned for biopolitical communities are hamstrung by the erroneous presumption that the simulated world is merely a copy of the real world, that causality flows only in one direction, and that the prospect of the new technology should, in a derivative way, merely serve the unfulfilled desires of the old.

The figure of the threshold promises us a somewhat different picture of this political present. Under its rubric, the simulated world is not a derivation of the real one, but is, rather, that space opened up through the recognition of our shared present, a moment of inception where finite life is not necessarily placed at risk, but *could* be placed at risk. As I promised earlier, here one returns to Perone’s idea that the political is an invention, but not, as might be assumed, the invention of some new simulated world or virtual space on the Internet. What we have in the phenomenon of a simulated world is neither a “new community” of cyber-liberation nor a further reduction of ourselves to quantifiable or irrelevant bare lives, but a rare and revelatory glimpse at the construction of a public space—a glimpse into the formation of a public universe that, like our own universe, does not exist in space and time, but constitutes space and time through the declination of a way of being for humans.

Like the threshold, the political present is the invented condition for the public space, but it is nothing that we simply create—it is the narrative that we author and yet in which we have also been unknowing participants. We are in it, but it is not ours. The threshold, the interface, the public space, connect and bridge ways of life—and thus, as seems more fitting, the threshold invents and generates in two directions, producing
the needs of bare life and the transcendence of a particular way of life, the desires of private life and the demands of public life, the burdens of the past and the liberation of any possible future. To be in the threshold of the public space—the political present—is a recognition of our finitude, but a finitude tasked with the responsibility of infinite possibilities.

To return, then, to my guiding question: What is placed at risk in the public space when it is conceived not as a traditional town square, but as a threshold? Since “life,” neither in the sense of bare life nor in the sense of a community we can create, is at risk exclusively in a simulated world, and thus in any public space, we can claim that what is placed at risk in the public space, what the political places at risk, is finite human life as the very possibility of political life. Only a finite life, one cognizant of the end of its possibilities for being, is capable of political life precisely because political life is not necessary, because it is not nature, but is based deeply in human freedom—a freedom, moreover, that we cannot not choose. To be human is to be tasked with the awareness of our finitude, and thus the possibility of the political. To be free is to be free from the drive to merely survive, to be more than bare life. Why, then, risk the political, particularly when it risks our very survival? To risk an encounter with the truly new is to seek an encounter with those whose kinship is rooted in nothing more than a similar risk. It is, in other words, to seek an encounter with Being. Strangely, the risk is a risk because it is not necessary; and yet, as we know, it is something we can forget. The political present, as the taking up of this search, is an invention, a developing surplus, an ulteriorità that tasks human freedom with its possibilities. Only under such conditions—of freedom and responsibility—is there a chance for generosity, humility, hilarity and, hopefully not for too many of you during this response, daydreaming.

valgenti@lvc.edu