

# VATTIMO'S LEGACY OF FREEDOM

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Gianni Vattimo left us on September 19, 2023, at the age of eighty-seven, having lived a long and productive life, lucid until the end despite the illness that made walking and speaking difficult for him. It must have been an especially cruel fate to accept for a man who was well known for his conviviality, for his argute and eloquent conversations, for the clarity with which he was able to convey the most difficult philosophical concepts—a trait that made him a beloved and sought-after teacher and mentor—and not last, for his love of traveling far and wide, and of trekking and mountain climbing, as Francesco Tomatis recalled in an obituary.<sup>1</sup> Vattimo, however, was not known for dramatizing. He had a history of personal losses, beginning with the father he never knew, a policeman who died when he was a year old, the beloved sister still at a young age, and two of his long-term companions, who died of AIDS and cancer, only a few years apart. Vattimo's candid autobiography *Not Being God* recounts these matters with a good dose of humor. Perhaps irony and lightness were the character traits that enabled him to survive his tragedies; as the saying goes, irony is the weapon (or the courage) of the weak—a generality that sounds particularly the case for someone, like Vattimo, who elevated “weakness” to a key philosophical concept and attitude toward the world.

1. Tomatis, “Gianni Vattimo e la forza debole del cristianesimo.”

Before addressing his specific contributions to philosophy, though, I would like to recall my first meeting with Vattimo—not because I think it particularly important but because it helps situate my perspective and thus clarify my contribution to the many memorials that have appeared in the Italian and international press since his death. Unlike Roberto Esposito (whose eulogy appeared in *La repubblica*), Maurizio Ferraris (*Il corriere*), Federico Vercellone (*La stampa*), Michela Marzano (*La stampa*), Daniel Gamper (*Debat*), or Santiago Zabala (*Los Angeles Review of Books*), I first met Vattimo late in his life, in 2018, at the presentation of his book *Essere e dintorni* (*Being and Its Surroundings*) at the Circolo dei Lettori in Turin, his native city. I am not a former student of his, and I mostly knew him through his work before meeting him in person. On that occasion, I was accompanying the founder and former president of the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, Professor George Smith, who conferred an honorary doctorate on Vattimo, welcoming him into “a circle of IDSVA faculty and honorary degree recipients, as well as students, each of whom in one way or another has given his or her life-work and thought to the future of a human consciousness that is free of metaphysics, an emancipation that is the singular promise of Vattimo’s concept of hermeneutics.”<sup>2</sup> In acknowledging the magnitude of Vattimo’s emancipatory project and of our debt to him, Smith offered a singular pledge—that the teaching at IDSVA would participate in the kind of hermeneutic praxis that is at the center of Vattimo’s philosophy.

I am mentioning this episode because, at the moment, it strikes me that the question of Vattimo’s legacy is not limited to the circle of specialized thinkers, former students, and close collaborators who have elaborated his teachings but includes as well all those who have been touched by his ideas, the originality of his interpretations of key philosophical figures, *in primis* Nietzsche and Heidegger, and by his humanity. The true heirs of Vattimo may indeed be those thinkers, activists, and artists who have been relegated to the margins of philosophical discourse by traditional academic hierarchies, even though he was a product and member of that academic world. Still, Vattimo was also a familiar figure in the Italian and international cultural and political panorama, thanks in part to his numerous television appearances on cultural programs that he directed. He worked for RAI and other networks beginning in the 1950s, wrote for national newspapers and magazines, and was elected to the European Parliament. This willingness to follow different paths for the diffusion of knowledge, which until recently was unorthodox and even openly snubbed by many in the academy, this generosity of his in listening to various interlocutors, is among the most memorable and captivating traits of Vattimo, who immediately put those

2. Smith, honorary doctorate address. Courtesy of the author.

who spoke with him at ease—as was the case with me on that day more than five years ago.

That event at the Circolo dei Lettori marked the beginning of a deeper engagement on my part with the philosopher's work and resulted in the publication of *The Vattimo Dictionary* by Edinburgh University Press in 2023. The volume includes contributions by fifty-three scholars, not all of them specialists on Vattimo. Published a few months before his death, the dictionary constitutes a memorial in itself, a testament to Vattimo's reach among a growing English-speaking readership and a point of departure for future scholarship on his work. The dictionary would not have been possible without access to his papers, held at the recently established Vattimo Archives at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona, curated and directed by Professor Santiago Zabala, who was among Vattimo's closest former students and collaborators. The archives, inaugurated in 2016, contain a vast trove of diaries, letters (including correspondence with Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Karl-Otto Apel), published and unpublished manuscripts, didactic materials, reviews, notes, and audiovisual files. Although it is not at all uncommon for prominent philosophers to have their archives hosted at an institution other than their own, for Vattimo, having his papers at Pompeu Fabra was a source of joy, because, as Zabala recalls in his obituary, "being abroad would draw more attention than if they stayed in Italy. 'If Jacques Derrida's archives are in California,' he said, 'it makes sense mine are in Barcelona. Actually, even better considering it's not that far.'"<sup>3</sup>

Vattimo was a frequent visitor in Spanish-speaking countries, especially in South America, whose intellectual climate had always been receptive to the notion of "weak thought" that he cultivated over the decades.<sup>4</sup> That Vattimo's papers are not archived at an institution in Italy is indicative of the international scope of his philosophy, which was first nurtured by German thinkers of the Continental tradition and then developed in a dialogue, unequaled among his Italian peers, with philosophers such as Derrida, Richard Rorty, Eugenio Trias Sagnier, and Slavoj Žižek.<sup>5</sup> The multifaceted cosmopolitanism of Vattimo's thought, combined with his capacity to embrace various fields of philosophical inquiry—art, politics, ethics, ontology, religion—is ultimately what distinguishes it from that of his contemporaries and invites further scholarship in the coming years. The polemical tone of some articles that have appeared in Italian newspapers, questioning the placement of the archive outside Italy, is disappointing.<sup>6</sup> I see it as another sign of the provincialism that characterizes a certain academic mindset in Italy—an attitude that

3. Zabala, "In This Conversation."

4. Vattimo, "Nessuna polemica le carte di Derrida sono in California," 35.

5. See Zabala, "Gianni Vattimo's Life, Philosophy, and

Archives"; Gallo, "Gli archivi di Vattimo a un'università di Barcellona," 35.

6. Against these polemics, see the video of Vattimo at the Pompeu Fabra archives. Vattimo, "Gianni Vattimo cedeix el seu arxiu personal a la UPF."

could not be farther from Vattimo's sensibility, which was essentially one of openness toward the world. Another factor at work here may be Vattimo's particular relationship with Turin and its intelligentsia, as Claudio Gallo sharply remarks in his entry for *The Vattimo Dictionary*. What kept Vattimo bound to his hometown was, in his own words, "the spirit of the historical resistance to Fascism,"<sup>7</sup> which he absorbed mostly from the Catholic groups with which he associated, including the *Azione Cattolica* and the Catholic Union. As Gallo observes, "His extraneousness to the city's Enlightenment tradition, which in Turin's upper classes was typically mixed up with a certain sternness (an echo of the Piedmontese military tradition), would mark his relation with the people who mattered in the city,"<sup>8</sup> in the direction of respectful distance. Significantly, the historically progressive and renowned publishing house Einaudi never published a book by Vattimo; his reading of Nietzsche and Heidegger through a postmodern lens, which situated them on the political Left, coupled with his Catholic sympathies and working-class background, was too unconventional for the intellectual elite of the city.<sup>9</sup>

Vattimo's life story is often said to trace an arc that closes toward the end to approximate a circle, but the return to religion of his last years was there from the beginning, together with his passion for politics and his reflections on aesthetics—the central themes of his philosophical production. Aesthetics occupies mostly the early part of his career. Under the supervision of his Turin mentor Luigi Pareyson, he wrote his dissertation on the concept of poiesis in Aristotle. Its thesis was partly determined by Pareyson's own aesthetics as a "theory of production, of making and fashioning,"<sup>10</sup> along with his concept of *forma formante* (forming form), which would prove influential in the early writings on aesthetics by his young advisee.<sup>11</sup>

Pareyson also played an important role in Vattimo's professional life, first making Vattimo his assistant and later backing him, rather than Umberto Eco, to succeed him in the professorial chair in aesthetics at Turin.<sup>12</sup> Vattimo's first courses were on Nietzsche, then on Heidegger, Bloch, and Schleiermacher.<sup>13</sup> It was Pareyson who encouraged Vattimo to study Nietzsche after dissuading him from pursuing a study of Adorno and "critical theory," both of which were fashionable at the time "with the left-leaning intellectuals that Pareyson particularly distrusted."<sup>14</sup> He also encouraged Vattimo to apply for a Humboldt Scholarship, which he received and which allowed him to spend a couple of years in Heidel-

7. Gallo, "Turin," 195.

8. Gallo, "Turin," 194.

9. Gallo, "Turin," 195.

10. Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality," 315–16.

11. See, for instance, Vattimo's *Poesia e ontologia*, published in 1967, revised and translated into English as *Art's Claim to Truth*. Here I am drawing on my introduction to *Vattimo Dictionary*; see Moro, introduction.

12. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 47.

13. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 318.

14. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 316.

berg studying with Gadamer and Karl Löwith. There Vattimo began the Italian translation of Gadamer's monumental *Truth and Method* (1960), which Vattimo completed in 1969 and for which he wrote an introduction. During this time, he also wrote books on Heidegger (1963), Nietzsche (1967), and Schleiermacher (1968), the last of which would earn him a full professorship at Turin in 1968.

As already noted, religion and politics were intertwined in Vattimo's life from an early age, but in the Heidelberg years Vattimo went through "a political shift from his former 'Catto-communist' position to what he then called a 'Catto-Heideggerian' mentality," in which the God of the Bible became the "Heideggerian Being"<sup>15</sup>—which is to say, a matter of interpretation rather than of dogmatic acceptance. Later, he credited Heidegger with bringing him closer to Christianity. As Vattimo wrote in *Being and Its Surroundings*:

The dismissal of metaphysics, which is radically accomplished only in Heidegger, is of great importance for continuing to think as a Christian. Metaphysics, i.e., the objectivity, unfurled before the mind's eye, of structures of Being that are assumed to be given; in short, God as supreme Object that I cannot fail to recognize. A sort of violence because, among other reasons, where metaphysics leads me is never a god before whom we can sing and dance, nor a god that loves me.<sup>16</sup>

The 1970s were a time of intensive work for Vattimo on Marx, Nietzsche, and nihilism. After the publication of his groundbreaking book on Nietzsche, *Il soggetto e la maschera*,<sup>17</sup> he took part in several lecture series on these topics, often paired with colleagues such as Massimo Cacciari, Pier Aldo Rovatti, and Remo Bodei, who were active in leftist circles and in the city councils that were sprouting throughout Italy. As Vattimo recounts, "Philosophy was an enormously popular subject back then. We all thought that the political transformation of Italy should be accompanied by a democratisation of philosophical questions, without sacrificing the level of cultural discourse on such matters."<sup>18</sup> In the same year that Heidegger died, 1976, the Italian Communist Party reached its peak in the national elections. It was the first time that eighteen-year-olds were allowed to vote in Italy. Vattimo was forty and had just finished editing and translating a collection of Heidegger's essays and speeches. Significantly, although without his consent, Vattimo had been listed as a candidate by the Italian Radical Party on their slate "Fuori" (Italian for "out"), a reference to homosexuality, forcing a public "outing" that was far removed from his own sensibility and cultural upbringing.<sup>19</sup>

15. Zabala, "Introduction," 8.

16. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 228.

17. A condensed and revised version of part 3 of *Il Soggetto et la maschera*—prepared, with Vattimo's approval, by the editors of *Common Knowledge*—was translated into Eng-

lish and published here in 1998. See Vattimo, "Beyond Despair and Conflict."

18. Vattimo, "Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality," 323.

19. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 73.

Leftist politics in Italy would take an extremist turn along Marxist-Leninist lines in the late 1970s. There was a position Vattimo could not endorse, even as some of his students were embracing it and getting arrested as a result, because he could not accept its “metaphysical and violent rhetorical subjectivity,” which would soon give way to the terrorism of the “lead years.”<sup>20</sup> He sympathized instead with the ideas that Antonio Negri was proposing, which called for more autonomous and anarchic forms of community organization that “would escape and transcend the prevailing logic of power.”<sup>21</sup> *Al di là del soggetto*, published in 1981, performs a critique of subjectivity that draws on such premises and postulates that “the true revolution would be an inner revolution, which would involve a dismantling of subjectivity.”<sup>22</sup> The 1980s were a fertile decade for Vattimo, who published in close order some of the most significant reflections on modernity and postmodernity, subjectivity and difference, art and technology, of the late twentieth century: *Le avventure della differenza: Che cosa significa pensare dopo Nietzsche e Heidegger* (1980; translated as *The Adventures of Difference*, 1993); *Al di là del soggetto: Nietzsche, Heidegger e l'ermeneutica* (1981; *Beyond the Subject*, 2019); *Il pensiero debole*, with Pier Aldo Rovatti (1983; *Weak Thought*, 2013); *La fine della modernità* (1985; *The End of Modernity*, 1988); and *La società trasparente* (1989; *The Transparent Society*, 1992), described by Jean-François Lyotard as “of major importance to the debate on the postmodern condition.”<sup>23</sup>

The concept of *pensiero debole* is central to Vattimo’s hermeneutics, and it is the contribution for which he is best known in Italy and throughout the international community. At times, the concept has been misunderstood by the popular press and conveniently dismissed by colleagues who have subscribed to different philosophical positions. Despite being tied to the emergence of the discourse around postmodernism in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the concept of “weak thought” is still current. Indeed, according to Rovatti, who collaborated with Vattimo on articulation of the theory, its full expression may still lie ahead, and it is needed today more than ever.<sup>24</sup> “Weak thought” starts by interpreting nihilism as a weakening of the structures of metaphysics and a dissolving of the concept of being as an “objective foundation.”<sup>25</sup> It goes on to elaborate a very particular and convincing notion of postmodernity as the “experience of the ‘end of history,’ not the appearance of a different, or newer stage of history itself.”<sup>26</sup> Aesthetics, as

20. Vattimo recounted that, when he became dean of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Turin in 1977 (a position he held until the early 1980s), he was threatened by the “Red Brigades” and for a time had to leave the city. See Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 327.

21. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 324.

22. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 324–25.

23. Vattimo, *Transparent Society*, back cover.

24. See the contribution of Pier Aldo Rovatti to Vattimo, Ferraris, and Rovatti, “Three tenors tra filosofia e psicoanalisi,” beginning at 9:45. See also Rovatti, “Weak Thought 2004,” 131–45.

25. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 337; Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 189.

26. Snyder, translator’s introduction, xviii.

Christine Ross observes, plays a central role in the postmetaphysical, postmodern experience of truth:

Postmodern art and aesthetics are understood not as a break with but as a critique of modernity, a dynamic that Vattimo explains by mobilising two Heideggerian concepts: *Überwindung* and *Verwindung*. Postmodernity, aesthetically understood, is not an overcoming (*Überwindung*) of modernity, insofar as modernity can never be dissolved by a process of rupture that is itself fundamentally modern (the value of the new, the cult of the *tabula rasa*), but a “healing of... and a resignation to” metaphysics, as well as a distorting (*Verwindung*) of it—so that tradition might be remembered, to better orient its dissolution and renewal.<sup>27</sup>

This crucial move leads also to an original reinterpretation of the Hegelian “end of art”: in lieu of a *death*, through *Verwindung* we participate in a *decline* of art but also in its convalescence. Postmodern art, although deprived of strong avant-garde propositions, still retains a weak emancipatory power by distorting and bending the system from within.<sup>28</sup> In *The Transparent Society* and *The End of Modernity*, Vattimo's particular declination of postmodernity—via a “weak” and positive reading of nihilism and of the decline of metaphysics in Heidegger—leads to a reevaluation of the process of aestheticization, starting with the historical avant-gardes but including as well the mass media's role in generating a more pluralistic society (“realised by virtue of the infinitude of interpretations permitted by the media”).<sup>29</sup> In assuming this position, Vattimo revises the thesis developed in Walter Benjamin's seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”—indeed, virtually inverts it by opening up the possibility that political critique could be situated in the diffuse aestheticization of postmodernity. Toward the end of his career, however, Vattimo returned to these positions with a more critical (and perhaps disillusioned) eye, in light of the unfulfilled promises that globalization and the pluralism of postmodern society seemed to hold.<sup>30</sup>

Following the impact of his books on the lively discussion around postmodernism in the 1980s, Vattimo was invited to give lectures and seminars at universities and other institutions throughout Europe and the United States. He returned to Italian television in 1986 for a series of programs for RAI 3 consisting of conversations with other Italian philosophers, including Rovatti, Francesco Barone, Remo Bodei, Italo Mancini, Vittorio Mathieu, Mario Perniola, Emanuele Severino, and Carlo Sini. These conversations were published in 1990 as the

27. Ross, “Postmodern Art/Aesthetics,” 155.

28. Ross, “Postmodern Art/Aesthetics,” 156.

29. Vercellone, “Aesthetics,” 25.

30. As acknowledged by Vercellone at the end of his contribution to the *Vattimo Dictionary* presentation at Pompeu Fabra University, November 7, 2023. See Zabala et al., “Homenatge a Gianni Vattimo,” beginning at 1:13:39.

book *Filosofia al presente (Philosophy at Present)*.<sup>31</sup> Vattimo's television appearances continued in the 1990s with a series called *Atlante ideologico del Novecento (Ideological Atlas of the Twentieth Century)*, broadcast on RAI 2 Nettuno (Network Teledidattico per l'Università Ovunque), aiming to address key concepts of contemporary philosophy for a general audience. Vattimo presented each episode with the same clarity of exposition and communicative ease that accompanied him throughout his teaching and lecturing career.

Between 1986 and 1995, Vattimo edited the Italian Philosophical Yearbooks, a series published by Laterza, focused on significant issues under international philosophical discussion. Some of the themes that Vattimo chose were selected as keywords in *The Vattimo Dictionary*, such as *secularization*, *history*, *language*, *hermeneutics*, and *poetry*. Among the contributors to the yearbooks are notable philosophers, including Gadamer, Lyotard, Rorty, Derrida, Badiou, and Severino. The European Yearbook series followed in 1992. Coedited by Vattimo and Derrida, it consisted of two books, the first devoted to religion, the second to law, justice, and interpretation. Stemming from his role as editor, Vattimo would next publish four books of his own, three on the theme of religion: *Crede di credere* (1996; *Belief*, 1999); *Dopo la cristianità* (2002; *After Christianity*, 2002); *Nichilismo ed emancipazione: Etica, politica e diritto*, edited by Zabala (2003; *Nilism and Emancipation*, 2004); and *The Future of Religion*, coauthored with Rorty and edited by Zabala (2005).

In these books, as elsewhere, the reflection is on religion not as metaphysics or faith but as adherence to cultural tradition. The interpretation of Christianity through the "weakening" effect of hermeneutics emphasizes "the incarnation, the kénosis, God that becomes man and therefore abandons his sacrality," leading to a philosophy of history in which "human emancipation can only be thought of as a progressive reduction of natural violence."<sup>32</sup> This achievement is perhaps the most important legacy of "weak thought." Vattimo's interpretation of religion in a "weakened" state also reflects his disapproval of the church's discipline, "particularly when it dictated a 'natural' sexual behavior for all believers."<sup>33</sup> Although Vattimo's homosexuality is not central to his thought, it nevertheless plays an important role in his distrust of all forms of "strong" thinking and normative ethical behavior that are dictated by religious dogma.

Vattimo's political engagement intensified during the 1990s, and he became increasingly active in the national press during those years, writing articles for the Turin-based *La stampa* and the leftist newspaper *L'unità*. In 1999, he won a seat as a deputy in the European Parliament, a position he held until 2004. The new millennium opened with the publication of *Vocazione e responsabilità del filo-*

31. Vattimo, *Not Being God*, 124.

33. Zabala, "Introduction," 8.

32. Assalto, "Gianni Vattimo"; my translation.

*sofo*, edited by Franca D'Agostini (2000; *Vocation and Responsibility of the Philosopher*, 2010), in which political life is articulated in philosophical terms as “a choice for human liberation that places pedagogy before ideology, the transformation of individual minds before the transformation of the shape of society.”<sup>34</sup> In the following decade, Vattimo would go on to develop his hermeneutical thought along more clearly delineated political lines, aiming to recast the idea of democracy in light of the end of metaphysics and renewing his interest in the possibilities of socialism.<sup>35</sup> Upon receiving the Hannah Arendt Prize for Political Thought in 2002, Vattimo gave a lecture titled “Globalization and the Relevance of Socialism,” in which he argued that Europe still had a critical role to play in distributing and rebalancing the global centers of power after the failure of the monocentrism imposed by the United States following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Europe, for him, was a model and a symbol of dialogism and plurality grounded in the diversity of its constituencies—the locus of a contemporary revitalization of the Kantian dream of cosmopolitanism. In 2004, Vattimo further elaborated these thoughts in *Il socialismo ossia l'Europa (Socialism, Namely Europe)*, which he unsuccessfully put forward as a political platform for his reelection to the European Parliament. Although his political career came to a momentary close (he would go on to complete a second term in the European Parliament in 2014), Vattimo pursued his political engagement through publication, public debates, interviews, and a strong presence in the media.

Vattimo continued this philosophical and political investigation of socialism and communism through the lens of “weak thought” with the publication of *Ecce Comu: Come si ri-diventa ciò che si era* (2007; *Ecce Comu: How One [Re-]Becomes What One Was*), an obvious homage to Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and a reference to “re-becoming” communist in an anarchic sense consistent with the pursuit of “a politics of opposition on the margins” and a “transformative Hegelian Marxism which contested any naturalistic conception of absolute principles and thus possessed a political vocation from the outset.”<sup>36</sup> The connection between this renewed conception of Marxism and hermeneutics is even more evident in a book cowritten with Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx* (2011). There, the authors take up Marx's famous statement—inscribed on his tomb—that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”<sup>37</sup> From a hermeneutic-Heideggerian perspective, Vattimo and Zabala affirm that, in order to change the world (and our interpretations of it), we must change the way we think. Once again, the goal is to let go of the

34. Valgenti, foreword, xiv.

35. In 2003, for instance, Vattimo presented “Heidegger: Philosopher of Democracy” at the twenty-first World Philosophy Congress, which he opened together with Jürgen Habermas.

36. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 343–44.

37. Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 1–2.

pretense of *overcoming* metaphysics—in itself a metaphysical gesture—in order to *weaken* metaphysics instead. For Vattimo and Zabala, thinking particularly of communist democratic models in contemporary South America, “a productive postmetaphysical philosophy will not only surpass metaphysics but also favor its discharge, that is, the weak who have become the vast majority of the population throughout the world.”<sup>38</sup>

In a paper titled “From Weak Thought to the Thought of the Weak,” presented in October 2008 at the Symposium on Religion and Science at Johns Hopkins University, Vattimo concerns himself with the distortions caused by technology and with their contribution to the growing proletarianization of society, which brought him closer to Marx and his critique of globalization. Vattimo “alludes to the fact that ‘weak thought’ was too ready to believe that the event of being already provided us with paths of emancipation, whereas such paths are still to be discovered.”<sup>39</sup> Just a few days earlier, he had delivered his final lecture as a professor at the University of Turin. Focused on the issue presented in the title—“From Dialogue to Conflict”—he stressed that “philosophical discoveries are not independent of the actual present.”<sup>40</sup> Vattimo’s “ontology of actuality” manifests itself not only in his attention to ongoing political and social events, through an “analysis of the sense of existence in the technologically oriented postmodern society,”<sup>41</sup> but also in the way he infuses his lectures and seminars with humor and a tendency to use humble and everyday examples to explain difficult concepts.

In a 2008 article dedicated to Vattimo, the renowned Italian writer Alessandro Baricco, who is one of Vattimo’s former students, remembers an example: “I think I understood Kantian ethics when you pointed out that at 3 a.m., in a deserted city, in front of a traffic light, you stop only if you are a fool: or if you are Kant.”<sup>42</sup> Humor and clarity were his defining traits as a teacher, qualities that are also notably present in his interviews and philosophical writings; yet he never made “clarity” the goal of his philosophy, but only “the starting point, the precondition without which thought cannot get going.”<sup>43</sup> It is not surprising, if one reflects on the meaning of “weak thought,” that Vattimo was always fond of peppering his lectures and talks with jokes, ironic word play, and witty examples: humor is a form of “lightness” or “lightening,” a way to make ideas somewhat more concrete and digestible, which pedagogically is a formidable tool—and a very difficult one to use successfully. This process of “lightening” occurs whenever metaphysical “weight” is subtracted from ideas so that they do not operate

38. Vattimo and Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*, 1–2.

39. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 349.

40. Vattimo, “Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality,” 349.

41. D’Isanto, introduction, 4.

42. Baricco, “Grazie, caro Vattimo, sei stato un maestro”; my translation.

43. Baricco, “Grazie, caro Vattimo, sei stato un maestro”; my translation.

dogmatically but, on the contrary, become open to interpretation and to being challenged. Zabala has declared that “among the first things my teacher, Prof. Vattimo, taught me is that to be ‘a philosopher means to be obsessed with the verb [*to be*] (concerning what is and what is not) because it invites you not to remain satisfied with your own identity and to seek the entire horizon of Being—in other words, to [engage in] dialogue.”<sup>44</sup>

One can appreciate Vattimo's talents as a teacher and a public speaker—in addition to his brilliance as a philosopher—in reading his Gifford Lectures. The Gifford Lectureship was established in 1888, and Vattimo was invited to deliver them in 2010, given his status as “one of the foremost philosophers in the world today” and “a major voice in European and world politics.”<sup>45</sup> Previous Gifford Lecturers had included William James, Alfred North Whitehead, Iris Murdoch, Hannah Arendt, Jean-Luc Marion, and Charles Taylor; the award is rightly considered “the Nobel Prize in philosophy,” as Vattimo acknowledged with characteristic humility and wit in his opening lecture. Together, these lectures were collected with his previous Cardinal Mercier Chair Lectures, given in Leuven, and with several other essays and published as *Of Reality: The Purposes of Philosophy*. This book, in Vattimo's own words, “presents a long and rather unsystematic work of reflection on the theme of the dissolution of objectivity or of reality itself, which began with the first expressions of ‘weak thought’ in the early 1980s.”<sup>46</sup> While such was indeed the theme of the Cardinal Mercier Lectures, in his Gifford Lectures Vattimo went on to observe that “the adversary to combat . . . seemed to me the return to order” that passed under the name of “realism” or “new realism” in contemporary philosophy and that attempted a return to metaphysical “certainties” in which the difference between “reality” (with scare quotes) and reality (without scare quotes) is erased in the name of a presumed objectivity and neutrality on the part of the speaker.<sup>47</sup>

In the introduction to *Of Reality*, Vattimo passionately defends his own political commitment, beginning with a lucid analysis of Heidegger's commitment to the cause of National Socialism in the 1930s, for which Vattimo offers no defense on any substantive basis but, instead, an understanding on historical grounds. The bottom line, for Vattimo, is that those for whom philosophy is an existential practice are called to engage with their particular epochal circumstance—and that those philosophers do not often operate from a position of privilege. It could be that Vattimo's position derives in part from his own personal history of

44. Zabala, “Interview with Santiago Zabala.”

45. As stated by David Jaspers in his introduction to Vattimo's first Gifford Lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LHX5F9TFPnc&t=5s>. Jaspers's remarks can be heard beginning at 1:10. The lectures are also hosted on the University of Glasgow website: <https://www.gla.ac.uk>

/events/lectures/gifford/recentlectures/giannivattimo/ (See “Opening Lecture: The End of Reality,” accessed August 16, 2024).

46. Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 1.

47. Vattimo, *Of Reality*, 2.

humble origins and from his ethical stance, defined by a secularized understanding of the doctrine of charity as love for one's neighbors and for the community of one's interpreters.<sup>48</sup>

Some of Vattimo's positions on society, politics, art, and philosophy are collected in several agile essays that emerged from working on previous papers and manuscripts as he was editing his archive for donation to Pompeu Fabra. The outcome is the book *Being and Its Surroundings* (*Essere e dintorni*, La Nave di Teseo, 2018), a true intellectual testament of a thinker who cultivated a philosophy based on the logic of conversation rather than the logic of argumentation, a philosophy of praxis affirming a hermeneutic approach to interrogate the present against every "return to order" in fashion today. The collection of essays is presented less as a unified sequence of chapters than as "variations on a single theme: the theme of a philosophy that is practiced by testing perspectives and exploring occasions—we might call it a philosophy of occasions."<sup>49</sup> These essays, composed as lectures and invited talks, revolve around the legacy of Heidegger's thought, particularly in light of the publication of his *Black Notebooks* (which prompted what Vattimo calls the "diary of a crisis"),<sup>50</sup> though Vattimo also returns in his book to the question of art.

In Vattimo's essay "The Boundaries of Art," which favorably observes the dismantling of borders in the avant-garde projects of the early twentieth century and beyond, he argues that "today we are able to rethink more clearly and perhaps more reasonably the positive alternative that Benjamin called the 'politicization of art.'"<sup>51</sup> Here, Vattimo compares the phenomenon of professionalization in art to the restoration of specialization in philosophy—which goes hand in hand with a renunciation of the latter's ties to the type of poetic or creative thought that has always characterized philosophical inquiry that is centered on politics, ethics, and existentialism, namely those that fall under the heading of "Continental philosophy." The aestheticization of social life that is in full swing today calls for a response by philosophy, "not by restoring the 'boundaries' of what is truly an aesthetic field but by asking itself what meaning the new social situation has or what valid (emancipatory) possibilities it opens up."<sup>52</sup>

In "Emergency and Event: Technique, Politics, and the Work of Art," Vattimo takes Heidegger's famous statement that the only "emergency is the lack of emergency" as a starting point for an interpretation of emergency as "opposition," and to advance the argument that in the political realm, particularly the European one, we are witnessing "the progressive dissolution of every form of opposition."<sup>53</sup> In this scenario, art has the singular task and opportunity of producing

48. See D'Isanto, introduction, 10.

49. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 3.

50. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 4.

51. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 134.

52. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 137.

53. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 78.

the kind of disturbance that alone can reveal the absence of emergency—and reveal the unresolved conflict between earth and world: “To put it in Heidegger’s terms, only the work of art ‘produces’ the earth, by putting forward the other who suspends the ordinary plausibility of the world, institutions, and routine. The absence of emergency can be felt only within the world of domination, as dysfunction, disturbance, and interruption, a *parole* that acquires meaning in its ability to disturb the quiet of the *langue*.”<sup>54</sup> This conflict can be seen most clearly in the work of the twentieth-century avant-garde, which has always occupied a central place in Vattimo’s reflections on art and which provides a link to the political and social dimension not only of the aesthetic experience but also of “weak thought” itself. Indeed, the disturbing aspects of art are, for Vattimo, the true foci of philosophy and politics and define an attitude toward the world. As he stated with characteristic humor in a recent interview: “The only type that I like today is the one who is a pain in the neck. Even Pope Bergoglio, when speaking to the youth, invites them to ‘*bacer lio*,’ to mess around, to make trouble.” This attitude comes from Vattimo’s being a “wrecked Marxist” and a Christian; philosophically, it is the opposite of practicing the “descriptive philosophy” that is now taught in academia (and that forms the basis for various kinds of neorealism): “The truth of being is the happening of projects, not the given structure.”<sup>55</sup> Ultimately, as Vattimo declares in the introduction to *Being and Its Surroundings* (citing Rorty), philosophical systems themselves can be thought of as novels and therefore as art; and the reading of philosophy can indeed “change one’s life,” which was for Gadamer the meaning of the experience of truth in art.<sup>56</sup>

The reference to Jorge Bergoglio is not incidental. Vattimo grew close to the current pope, who in various ways is trying to modernize and redirect the Catholic Church after the pontificate of the conservative Josef Ratzinger. Bergoglio’s is a message of charity, of special attention toward the “weak subjects of the world,” and of support for progressive causes. He indeed is fond of lost causes and is often the only voice one hears outside the choir of “univocal thought” that is the real obverse of weak thought today. By “univocal thought” (*pensiero unico*), Vattimo meant the one-way philosophy of neoliberal, “positivist capitalism . . . imposed by the framed democracies” of the post–Cold War order and driven by a form of metaphysical violence.<sup>57</sup> This critique of univocal thought goes hand in hand with a critique of globalization, “viewed as the Western project of global dominion responsible for the ongoing destruction of entire cultures and the increase of economic and social inequalities on a worldwide scale.”<sup>58</sup>

This critical voice is needed—and missed—today as the world is consumed

54. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 81.

55. Assalto, “Gianni Vattimo.”

56. Vattimo, *Being and Its Surroundings*, 3–4.

57. Grimshaw, “Capitalism/Liberalism,” 47.

58. Basili, “Globalisation,” 84.

in ever more senseless wars, both literal and figurative, and seemingly without end or goal. As Pope Francis said in an Angelus last November, we need to live, speak, and think coherently; there should be no duplicity between what one says and what one does. I would add that there are not many philosophers other than Vattimo who have given us an example of a life lived in full attunement with their own thinking and who have given us means to “do” philosophy as a way of being in the world. Another such was Nietzsche, of whose work Vattimo was one of the most original interpreters. If there is a legacy that Vattimo leaves us, it is a legacy of freedom: as one of his longtime friends and former students has remarked, he was a master who transmitted no binding inheritance to his pupils. Nothing was more repellent to him than being a fawned-over professor. He was antidogmatic from start to finish.<sup>59</sup> I consider myself fortunate to have met him along the way, to have felt his generosity of spirit and human touch—his palpable *simpatia*; to have contributed to the dissemination of his thought; and to have met, thanks to Vattimo, a constellation of thinkers, readers, and interpreters who are carrying forward, in their own, independent ways, the hermeneutical work that is the sole condition for any sort of change.

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59. Vercellone, contribution to the *Vattimo Dictionary* presentation. See Zabala et al., “Homenatge a Gianni Vattimo,” beginning at 1:13:39.

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