

Pier Alberto Porceddu Cilione

The inner life of time Nature across generations

Abstract

This contribution proposes to reflect on a different way of considering the link between temporality and nature, between aîôn and physis, in dialogue with the words and works of the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone. The basic idea is the following: we will not be able to essentially determine our cognitive and experiential relationship with nature, until we are able to know, experience and represent the time inscribed in being itself. The philosophical tradition has developed its conception of temporality mainly along two lines: a “cosmic” line, of a physical, objective temporality, and a “phenomenological” one, of a temporality as an internal articulation of human consciousness. Through the archaeological and conceptual excavation carried out by Penone, we will ask ourselves what it does mean to take care of the “subjective time of things”.

Keywords

Age, Nature, Generation

Received: 31/07/2022

Approved: 05/10/2022

Editing by: Agostino Bertolotti

© 2022 The Author. Open Access published under the terms of the CC-BY-4.0.

pieralberto.porcedducilione@univr.it (Università degli Studi di Verona)

Una diversa concezione del tempo è la condizione
Per meglio cogliere la realtà dell'albero in crescita e la sua fluidità.
La nostra aderenza all'azione dell'albero presuppone
Una mutata interpretazione della realtà.
Tale condizione ci proietta in un immaginario nuovo,
ricco di forme e sensazioni inconsuete.
Se una delle funzioni dell'arte è la rilettura continua della realtà,
mutare la concezione del tempo ci pone nella condizione di rivedere e ricreare
le convenzioni del reale e ci permette
di immaginare forme nuove con nuovi valori.
Le singole cose concepiscono e misurano il tempo con i loro ritmi
Esistenziali, biologici, di formazione e di esistenza.
La concezione del tempo che ha una farfalla, un fiore, un albero,
un animale, un uomo, una pietra, una montagna, un fiume,
un mare, un continente, un atomo produce la varietà infinita
del pensiero e delle forme dell'universo¹.
(G. Penone, *Scritti*, 2022)

1. *A third paradigm*

In the Western philosophical tradition, two conceptual landscapes have dominated the conception of temporality. The first conception is what could be defined as “cosmic” time. It corresponds to the idea that temporality can be conceived as the “measure” of universal becoming. Faced with the evidence of becoming, temporality is its *metron*. The second conception is what could be defined as “phenomenological” time. It corresponds to the idea that the most authentic determination of temporality analyzes the internal flow of intrapsychic time. The first paradigm corresponds to the idea of a “physical”, spatialized time, an empty dimension, within which everything that exists happens. The second paradigm corresponds to the idea of a “psychic” time, folded into the internal interplay

¹ “A different conception of time is the condition / To better grasp the reality of the growing tree and its fluidity. / Our adherence to the action of the tree presupposes / A changed interpretation of reality. / This condition projects us into a new imaginary, / full of unusual shapes and sensations. / If one of the functions of art is the continuous reinterpretation of reality, / changing the conception of time puts us in the condition / to review and recreate the conventions of reality and allows us / to imagine new forms with new values. / Individual things conceive and measure time with their own rhythms / Existential, biological, of formation and existence. / The conception of time that has a butterfly, a flower, a tree, / an animal, a man, a stone, a mountain, a river, / a sea, a continent, an atom produces infinite variety / of thought and of the forms of the universe”.

of memory and perception. At the cost of simplifying, to this dichotomy correspond, on one hand, the idea of an “external”, “objective”, worldly, measurable temporality, and, on the other hand, an “internal”, “subjective”, specifically human temporality, which knows experiential and qualitative elements. Of course, the philosophical tradition also knows the attempt to think of the “junction” of the two dimensions. It is always possible to think of an “objective” time that is the reflection of a “subjective” temporality of an extended mind, or, conversely, an internal temporal *dis-tensio* that “introjects” the enlarged temporality.

The philosophical tradition, however, has perhaps been less generous in reflecting on a *third* paradigm, half hidden from the most appropriate philosophical conceptuality, which nevertheless represents one of the simplest and most elementary ways through which we experience the world. This third paradigm corresponds to the idea of a “time/age”, of a temporality that takes place and crystallizes *within the being*, of a temporality that is collected and mineralized *in the entity itself*. Of course, this idea can generally correspond to Bergson’s notion of *durée* (and its further extensions in Gilles Deleuze). But here it is not just a question of re-thinking, through that notion, the vitality, or the creativity of nature, and the definition of a “non-retrogradable”, non-spatialized and qualitatively non-homogeneous time. Here it is a question of thinking how our experience of the world and temporality can change, starting from common evidence: the fundamental experience we have of the relationship between being and temporality is not that of thinking about the entity *within* the vast “ether” of temporality, but that of thinking of time *in the heart of the entity itself*. The entity is not “immersed” in time like the fish in the pond. Understood in this way, it is *time* that is *coagulated* in the body, it is *becoming* that is *stratified* and *mineralized* within matter. Each entity thus becomes a sort of sundial of its becoming, a monument-object to its origin and its growth.

It is possible that the philosophical question of temporality is not simply contained in the ascertainment of universal *kinesis*, and of the *metron* that marks its occurrence. The most appropriate investigation of a philosophical conception of temporality is what questions the abysmal temporal origin of the entity and its unpredictable future. Each being contains the temporal measure of its becoming, the chronic *metron* of its development. The problem is not so much of “giving reason” (*logon didonai*) to the fact that the human psyche is able of “thinking” and “measuring” time, but rather the fact that it is able to understand that *everything that exists has become*, and is therefore *temporally stratified*, and has time as

its constituent dimension. Each entity has an *age*: this is its simplest and most proper relationship we have with temporality. It is philosophically relevant to note that the human mind is structurally capable of breaking through the limits of pure presence, of transcending the perception in the larger memorial and imaginative sphere of a vaster temporality, which exceeds the pure givenness of an instantaneous present. Temporality is not the *Raum* in which things happen, but it is the *memorial intensity of becoming*, inscribed in the entity itself. The Italian sculptor Giuseppe Penone speaks of a “time understood as the subjective dimension of things” (Penone 2022: 54).

In front of any entity, we see – or rather, we *imagine* – the antiquity of its point of in-origin, the invisible temporal depth in which the *arché* of its *kinesis* is hidden. We also see – or imagine – its probable future disappearance, often well beyond the time given to a single human life. Questioning the “structural antiquity” of the entity (in particular the natural entity) means putting a conception of time interested in reflecting on the *age of the entity* (and not so much on the “instantaneous place” of its temporalization) in the foreground. Each entity is also a *conglomerate of time*, and its chronic conglomeration is defined through the concept of *aetas*, of “age”. Of this time inscribed in being, philosophy still knows too little.

2. *Again about the tò tí ên êinai*

A philosophical mind begins to question the entity in its presence, in its actuality, in its *Vorhandenheit*. But it also knows that what is in front of us *has become*, it was born and raised: its presence is the material monument of the very deep, invisible, ineffable temporal processes that have constituted being as it is. The philosophical mind asks: “What is ‘this’ that is in front of us? It is something, certainly. From where? Why does something exist?” (Cacciari 2014: 27)². Here is the fundamental question of metaphysics. But no exhaustive determination of the entity can be resolved in the analysis of its pure presence. “It is a question of understanding whether the entity, and precisely in its concreteness, can be resolved in pure presence” (Cacciari 2014: 21). And it is evident that an essential and philosophically founded knowledge of the entity cannot be resolved in the analysis of its pure presence. Doing this would mean disregarding

² Translations from Cacciari’s and Penone’s texts are mine.

that not only the entity has a *duration*, or an ability to resist becoming, but that *it is the effect of that becoming*, that it *contains within itself* the genealogy of its immemorial growth. The temporal growth, which constituted the present being of the entity, intrinsically belongs to the domain of everything there is. And the measure of this invisible development, of this structural mineralization of temporality in the heart of every being, *is its age, aetas*. The temporal self-transcendence of *physis* is at the heart of any authentic understanding of being:

The ontological difference that intrinsically belongs to philosophy – and that perhaps it is finally necessary to remember – is a difference *immanent to the being*, a difference that the presence-actuality of the *ón* preserves in itself. Being reveals precisely in its appearance ‘that’ that transcends it as ‘what’ it was-and-will be, the infinity of its ‘imperfect’ and the infinity of its ‘future’. In other words, the being re-veils, appearing, the way too deep for the determining *logos*, *apophantikós*, of its own *physis*. (Cacciari 2014: 13)

No authentic determination of being (and in particular that of nature) is possible, if one does not experience the incalculable, abysmal, chronic depth that grounds all that is. Our experiential relationship with the world is inadequate and inauthentic, if it is not based on the ability to imagine the inexperienced process, the invisible movement, which led to this determined concreteness (See Cacciari 2014: 39). Nature, *physis*, cannot be only determined as a collection of natural material entities, albeit dynamically interconnected (on this, see Zatta 2017). Nature is, above all, *time*, it is the *materialization of becoming*. *Physis*, accordingly understood, should rather be regarded as the *temporal matrix* of everything that happens. Nature cannot be determined essentially as the articulation and layout of materiality, but as the *spacing* in which entities form themselves, starting from their own process of genesis and growth. At all times, the entity reveals its presence, but hides the abyssal character of its slow emergence and its future. As Cacciari writes, “the very presence of the entity is more-than-present [più-che-presente]” (Cacciari 2014: 45). The appropriate time of nature is not an abstract present, nor a vague future, to which human care appeals. *Physis* is the transcendence of these temporal determinations, in view of a broader, overarching, chronic spacing. Thus again Cacciari:

the entity is *not* only *estí*, it is not just presence. The entity ‘was’ what is hidden in *this* presence, it was the cause that made this *thing* in its own singularity, what generated it in this identified form. And we can trace this origin only *imperfectly*.

That is, we could never make it present, reduce it to the perfect present of the *theorein*. No entity has one cause. It can only be indicated in the *imperfect*. (Cacciari 2014: 42)

The abyssal chasm of time is hidden in every entity, a “dark Abyss of Time”, from which it originated, and to which it is destined. One of the most controversial and enigmatic definitions of classical philosophy then acquires a clearer determination: “*To tí ên eînai, quod quid erat esse*, what the *tò ón* was. The presence of being therefore implies an imperfect” (Cacciari 2014: 36). The present face of what is there is only the “screen” that reveals *and* occludes the secret growth process that formed it.

Nature is the place where this “event” acquires concreteness. When I look at a tree, I see its indubitable presence. It is indeed an object of my experience, a *Gegenstand* that stands out *against* my visual act. But I also know that it has *an age*. I know that it comes from an antiquity that has gathered and layered in the fibers of its being. My experience of the tree does not simply cause the tree to fall into psychic intuitions that temporalize my own experience of it. A more intimate experience of the tree reveals to us that, in its presence, it is the object-monument to the very pro-cess of its own growth.

3. Generations

The tree, if it is there, present, has not only become, but has had a genesis. The human mind is, above all, capable of articulating the experience of genesis and universal growth, even where the process is not visible in its entirety. Each entity is the mineralization of its *genos*. The idea that “*genos*” means, at the same time, “birth”, “age”, “lineage” and “generation” is very suggestive. In a broader sense, *genos* has the meaning of “race”, “stock”, “kin”. It indicates the structural connection of “kin” and “kind of generation”. *Genos* indicates the “direct descent”, the “offspring”. It indicates the “house”, the “family”, the “family lineage”, the “clan”, but also “class”, “sort”, “kind”, both from a *logical* point of view and from a *taxonomical* point of view. It also means “class” or “kingdom”, but also “species”, in a strictly botanical sense. *Gene* are also the “crops”. In Plato’s *Timaeus* (Plat., *Tim.* 54b), the *gene* are “the elements”. Even just from this quick etymological indication, it is well understood how the

problem of the relationship between the *generations* of living beings, between ages and eras, does not only concern the peculiar historicity of human action, the historical scansion of human generations. Nature itself, *physis*, is the interplay-space of generations. It is the *spacing* in which the intertwining of *eras*, *ages*, *births*, *generations*, *lineages* of everything that lives is given: *genos*.

It is true, the tree had a genesis, a point of emergence of its individuality, the *arché kinéseos* of its development and growth. But is this starting-point real? Is it really the *arché* of its development? It is evident that the tree was born from a parental generation process: it is the “birth”, the *genos*, the offspring, of the previous generation (on this, see Balme 1962). Therefore, the maternal/paternal tree from which his seed was born structurally participates in its birth. The time of its origin is the origin of its generative and generational development. But this process can be hypothetically traced back to thousands of previous generations, and its development potentially contains thousands of trees generations to come. What will be the point of emergence of an entire lineage of trees, of an entire plant class? Trying to look at the *arché* of the universal generation means gazing into a bottomless abyss, into the chronic *Abgrund* of *physis*.

The temporality of the living far transcends the short range of individual life: *physis*, understood in this way, is the inconceivable and luxuriant coexistence of arboreal generations, of different ages and *gene*, which dominate the human imagination with the endless antiqueness of their inconceivable provenance. And all these plant entities have an age, they concretize their duration, they coincide with the sculptural materialization of (their) time. They embody their own aging process. It is well understood that the key term here is “age”. How should the concept of “age” be philosophically articulated? Generally speaking, “age” means “the length of time during which a being or thing has existed”, but also “the length of life or existence to the time spoken of or referred to”. If age also means “the particular period of life at which a person becomes naturally or conventionally qualified or disqualified for anything”, it means that age has to do with an idea of the fullness of maturity. “Age” – this is of greatest interest – also means “generation” or “a series of generations”, as in the expression “ages yet unborn”. “Age” means also “a great length of time”. “Age” can have the conceptual value of “span of life”: “the average life expectancy of an individual or of the individuals of a class or species”. “Age” naturally has to do with the articulation of human and generational eras, of the divisions of historical events. Like

“genos”, “age” means both “age” and “generation”. The “matter” of the *genos* (golden, silver, bronze, and iron) determines in Hesiod the succession of ages and generations. But “age” also means the “process of growing old”. The verb “to age” means “to grow old”, “to mature”, to reach fullness and maturity, or even old age: “to bring to maturity or a state fit for use”.

These ambivalences, this semantic vastness, are also found in the Latin term *aetas* (see the Italian word “età”). *Aetās*, derived from *aeuus*, has as its antecedent – testified by the Lex XII Tab. – in the term *aeuitas*. *Aetas* means “age”, “life”, in the sense of “time to live”, as in the expression *agere aetātem*. It also means “period of life”. But it also means “generation”, “era”, “time”. The adjective *aeternus* obviously comes from *aetas*, in the sense of “qui dure toute la vie, éternel” (Ernout, Meillet 1951, v. *aeuus*), as opposed to “mortal”, *mortalis*. Arnout and Meillet recall how the Latin preserves with this word the Indo-European name of the *durée*, in general of the “longue durée”, the “durée sans confine”. Indo-European roots offer the forms **āyu*, **yu*, which in the Vedic records become *āyúh*, meaning “genius of the life force”. Benveniste proposes that they are the same roots as *iūuenis*, “young”. Ancient Greek has *aiôn*, with the sense of “time-duration”; *aei*, as it is well known, means “forever”. The “age”, *aeuus*, contains the promise of eternity in itself, the long duration of a cosmic time, the “age”, or the portion of this long duration; as well as *aetas*, the age, the “identified” duration, which participates in the *aiôn*, which blossoms in the heart of the *longue durée* (Ernout, Meillet 1951, v. *aeuus*).

4. *Tree of time*

In the economy of these reflections, it is useful to note that, in the tree, an even more peculiar and fascinating articulation of time is at stake. The tree, like the entity in general, reveals its presence and – at the same time – shows and hides the dark temporalization of its genesis and growth. As the tree grows, it gives shape to the process of formation of its *genos*. The tree, therefore, shows that it has an *age*: it shows that the most authentic determination of its relationship with time is not that of *being-in-the-time*, but that of a place where time is *inscribed in being*. According to these examples, the tree *gives shape* to time. It is the very structure of time that is articulated according to the tree’s architecture. It is perhaps a question of the possible “ramification” of temporality. Even Bergson,

arguing against the possibility that a tree does not age, shows that he is well acquainted with the specific “tree structure” of time:

It is easy enough to argue that a tree never grows old, since the tips of its branches are always equally young, always equally capable of engendering new trees by budding. But in such an organism – which is, after all, a society rather than an individual – something ages, if only the leaves and the interior of the trunk. And each cell, considered separately, evolves in a specific way. *Wherever anything lives, there is, open somewhere, a register in which time is being inscribed.* (Bergson 1944: 20)

On closer inspection, in fact, the tree is not only suspended between the present time of its evidence, and the intimate and inexperienced process of its genesis and its decomposition. Each segment of the tree fractally reproduces the structure of the whole, generating a surprising temporal multiplicity. A portion of the branch is undoubtedly younger than the trunk (it belongs to a following generation, to a later *genos*, it has another *age*). And such a branch can act as a trunk to further branches, which are even younger. The latest youngest branches form a very recent *genos*. Each bud can generate new *gene*, each youngest gem has the potential of becoming old, of aging. Starting from this tree-paradigm, we could deduce that each entity records the inscription of time in its most intimate fibers.

The question of the *durée* articulated above not only becomes the key topic for unraveling an abstract idea of spatialized physical time, bringing it back to the depths of our most proper experience. It becomes the place where we determine the very substance of being: “But duration is something very different from this for our consciousness, that is to say, for that which is most indisputable in our experience. We perceive duration as a stream against which we cannot go. It is the foundation of our being, and, as we feel, the very substance of the world in which we live” (Bergson 1944: 45).



Fig.1. G. Penone, *Albero porta-cedro*, 2012



Fig. 2. Giuseppe Penone at work

5. *Structure of time*

Why are these images so striking and fascinating? Is their effectiveness simply due to the iconic power of the image, or *there is something*, in Giuseppe Penone's artistic practice, of vital importance for the understanding of everything there is³? As our aesthetic tradition has often pointed out, the work of art highlights the genetic processes of nature. In Penone's works, the secret temporality of nature is revealed. Through his artistic practice, we learn *to know* and *to respect* the most original temporality of the entity, its chronic consistency, its *age*. As Salvatore Settis points out, "Giuseppe Penone finds the incipit of (his) sculpture in the silence of the forest" (Settis 2018: 149). Here emerges an instructive convergence between some fundamental terms of classical antiquity, through which the Ancients essentially named our experience of nature, and, we could say, the nature of nature: *Physis*, nature, is connected to

³ On Penone's work, see Busine 1994; Busine 2012; Didi-Huberman 2000; Ingold 2018; Penone 2018; Penone 2021; Penone 2022; Settis 2018; Settis 2020.

the experience we make of *hyle*, the matter, which is the *sylva* of the Latins. Nature coincides with the idea of an *ingens sylva*. But *sylva* is a generic and reductive term, to determine the relationship of the Latins with the *forest* in an essential way. *Nemus* is probably the key term. Something sacred is inscribed in the ecstatic relationship between plants and human beings⁴. Thus writes Pliny the Elder: “We feel ourselves inspired to adoration, not less by the sacred groves and their very stillness, than the statues of the gods, resplendent as they are with gold and ivory [...]” (Plin., *Nat. Hist.*, 12.1, 12.2; see Pliny the Elder 1938-1962). Giuseppe Penone’s fascination with trees has a noble and ancient origin: his intuition was born here, which led him to do the work on tree growth (See, Settis 2018: 150). And it is Giuseppe Penone himself who underlines how our most proper experience of the forest is the one that makes us travel within natural temporality: “Entering the wood forest is a journey through time, / in the history of every single tree and every year of his life. / [...] / It is an idea that only a thought adhering to matter / can develop” (Penone 2022: 65).

Salvatore Settis notes that “his [Penone’s] sculpture is a thought process that discovers the secrets of things yet reveals more about the subject than about the object” (Settis 2018: 150). By digging up and carving the material, the self – or rather – that common *substratum*, that *xynòn*, which unites men and plants, organic growth and experiential growth, “age of life” and “age of the world”, is also excavated and sculpted⁵. Therefore, “the excavation of the trunk sets up a sort of archaeology of the self, bringing back a particular moment in the artist’s life, one that can even be dated by the tree’s growth rings (a method that archaeologists call dendrochronology, or ‘dating by tree’)” (Settis 2018: 150).

There is, in Giuseppe Penone’s art, the awareness that digging wood means acting *archaeologically*. As his title states, carving the wood means investigating the very “structure of time” (See, Penone 1994). The structure of time that we see at work in *physis* is none other than the *durée* of the entity, which, as it ages, retains the stratifications of its growth processes. As Laurent Busine writes about Penone’s art, “chose extraordinaire: l’arbre, à la fin de son existence, contient encore toutes les formes

⁴ On the paradoxical *xynòn* of trees and human beings, see Ingold 2013; Kohn 2013; Miller 2002; Repici 2000.

⁵ On the fascination of contemporary philosophical debates for trees and plants, see, among others, Chamovitz 2012; Coccia 2018; Fechner 1848; Hall 1994; Mancuso 2019; Marder 2013.

et toutes les apparences successives qu'il a eues durant toute sa vie. Chaque étape est conservée au dedans de lui, masquée par l'anneau de croissance suivant et ainsi de suite" (Busine 1994: 91-92).

This is none other than the secret of the *durée*, the secret inscribed in the temporalization of *physis*. In Penone's sculptures, carving wood means carving time. "To dig into the tree is to undo the work of time" (Ingold 2018: 76). If technical thought wants to see the beam in the form of a tree, Penone's sculptural thought reverses the arrow of time, and points out the layered shape of a tree in a beam: "To extract from a beam the form of a tree that is fossilized within it" (Settis 2018: 155). In spite of the imposing materiality of Penone's art (stone, wood, bronze, marble...), the real matter of his sculpture is *time*, its transparent process of becoming. "To redo the work of time, backward, means to compress its duration, shaping time as if it were wax. The tree's slow growth is inverted and compressed by the 'excavation' that rediscovers its shape inside the beam" (Settis 2018: 155).

6. *Under the bark*

What exactly do we see when we look at *Albero porta-cedro*? First of all, the bulk of the material is striking, the material heaviness of the trunk. The trunk acquires in itself a very high plastic value, it becomes a sculpture itself. In spite of its mutilated, partial appearance, it makes us reflect on the sculptural character intrinsic to the natural entity, to the iconic force naturally inscribed in the plant form. In the eye of the aesthetic attention (and, even more so, in a context of museification), the cedar trunk is a manifestation of the characters of "artistry", already originally inscribed in natural *kinesis* and its morphogenic processes. However, that trunk is hollowed out. Something has been removed to reveal a kind of "inner essence" of matter. The trunk which, in its monumental materiality, seems to coincide with the work, turns out to be a sort of paradoxical "box" of a more internal work. The trunk holds what has been defined as "the inner life of forms" (See, Penone 2018).

A more "original" cedar is revealed within the "external" cedar, the "material" cedar. A sort of *xoanon*, of *daidolon*, emerges from the depth of *hyle* (See, Settis 2018: 146-148). Again, we encounter the strange tree structure of time. What is more internal (the *xoanon* of the most "internal" cedar) seems "younger" in age but is at the same time a figure of an "older" stage of the tree's sculptural development. The more "intimate"

cedar contains “less time” than does the sculptural trunk. What appears, however, is the structural relationship of the two cedars, of the two forms, of the two times, of the two ages. The one, the innermost, younger form represents the anterior stage of a development, the culmination of which, whose *akmé*, is the external cedar, the “mature” cedar. Here we see the *times harmonization of physis*. We see what the eye can never see, i.e., the shape that the tree (or the entity in general) once *had*, in spite of the shape it has now, in the act of our present perception.

It is only through the metamorphic alchemy of the imagination that the human mind is able to see the process of growth of the entity, to see the structural metamorphosis of time within the entity, i.e. its *aging* (on this, see Woodcox 2018). The imagination *fills the void* of the removed matter, reconstructing the process that structurally and morphologically unites the two “stages”, the two “forms”, the two “ages” of the cedar. We see *synchronously* and *archaeologically* what the mere perception of a compact form can never reveal. In the *harmony* of the two ages of wood, we observe two points of the metamorphic *kinesis* of its development. Thus, Penone speaks of this paradoxical temporal coexistence: “A large tree contains within it / The shape of its previous existences, it is the enlargement / Of the small tree that still exists within it” (Penone 2022: 266). Furthermore, with a paradoxical chronic inversion, the material here becomes the “maturity” of the work, not its docile material presupposition. The “big” cedar functions as a capacious shell of what it once was. The work (what appears to be the “real” work, the younger and more internal cedar, the effect of a more deliberate sculptural act by the artist) emerges by dint of removing, from a more external natural work, more “superficial”. Sculpting here becomes a process of archaeological excavation to discover the temporal stratifications of *physis*⁶.

⁶ Tim Ingold, in one of his brilliant essays, also proposes an analogy between the sculptural act of Penone and the activity of an archaeologist-botanist: “Archaeologists like to go back in time. In their practices of excavation, they remove layer of material, assigning the artifacts they find embedded in it to their appropriate position in what they call “the record”. It is a timeline in which everything has a date. [...] But what does it mean to say of these things that they have a certain antiquity? Does it even make to ask how old they are? The stone, after all, was there for eons before it was quarried and fashioned into a tool and is still with us now. [...] The dates we assign to artifacts, at the point of fabrication, are but passing moments in the never-ending lives of the materials of which they are made. Or consider an ordinary item of furniture, like a table. We know the year it was made: when a carpenter set to work with regular beams and planks, sawn and planed from seasoned wood, to fashion the assembly. Yet [...]”

7. *The future of nature*

Through Penone we rediscover that nature is essentially made up of time. Any definition of nature that stops at a mere investigation of matter runs the risk of being philosophically inconsistent. *Physis*, however, not only coincides with a bearing past, with its own venerable antiquity, so dear to Latin religious thought. Nor is it just the simultaneous presence of billions of plant individuals swarming in the synchronic landscape of the different generations. It is, above all, *future time*. The “future” is inscribed in the very name of nature. Thus comments Cacciari:

bin (*ich bin*, to be) is not based on the root of *sind*, *sein*, which is the same as *sumus*, *esse*, but on that of *-bhu*, *-phy*, on which they are formed, in Sanskrit as in Greek and Latin, the terms that indicate birth, growth, ek-sisting, becoming: *physis*, *fio*, *fieri*. [...] Just reflect on the fact that the same root in Latin underlies terms that indicate the past (perfect, not im-perfect!), *fui* (I was), and the future, having-been and non-yet-being. Precisely this is *Physis*: a having-been that never sets, a past that always ‘infutures’ itself, never ceasing to be, a ‘quiet’ becoming, in the words of Hegel. (Cacciari 2014: 77)

“Nature”, in Latin, could be nothing more than a future participle: its name sounds like “the whole circle of everything that – having been gen-

within every beam or plank still lurks the tree from which it was once cut. The tree is older than the table. But then how old is it? Of course, there was a moment in time when it must have germinated from a parent seed. But at that time, it was not yet wood, not even a sapling, but a soft and delicate green shoot. The tree is not just older than the table; it is older than its wood! Nor is there any reason to stop there. For the seed retains its vital connection with the tree on which it once grew: both parental tree and seedling are part of the same cycle of life. The tree, in short, has no point of origin since it is originating all the time. And continual origination is just another word for growth. Once we attend to its material, then, our wooden table no longer figures as an object in the record. Rather the record is in the object, embedded in a material history of germination and growth. With kind of reverse archaeology, we excavate not to discover objects in the record but to find the record in objects. We could take our table, or a larger wooden beam, or even a fallen trunk, and cut away layer after layer, guided by the rings of annual growth, to find nested within it a series of even more slender trees, right back to the initial sapling. Within every tree hides ever-younger versions of itself. But the younger the versions, the older they are, in the sense that they have been there for longer. Contrariwise, the older the versions of the tree, the younger they are. That is why to dig into trees is to undo the work of time. It is like running a film of the tree’s growth, shot over decades, if not centuries, in fast reverse” (Ingold 2018: 76).

erated – will be generated”. Even Penone, despite his archaeological excavation in matter, understands well that, by tapping into the deeper layers of being, one touches the mechanism by which what is now the core will be skin. By digging into the wooden fibers, one draws on that intimate cedar, young and anterior, which is the “unconscious” of the trunk-matter. But this young cedar, this internal son of the mother-trunk, will be enclosed by his future existence. He himself will be the envelope that we now see as the outer sarcophagus of his reliquary existence: “[...] If the tree grows covering and enclosing / its existence within it, year after year, it can easily / Imagine finding the shape it had at a certain year / Removing the following years. The tree wraps itself every year / with a layer of matter that encloses its experience / and which in turn will be enclosed by its future existence” (Penone 2022: 304).

Nothing more than art embodies this “sending” of being, this need for permanence, this projection into the future. But Penone’s works are not simply crossed by a generic desire for permanence (and perhaps for immortality). Of course, every serious artist proclaims his *exegi monumentum aere perennius*. Penone does not avoid this fascination. Proof of this is the ubiquitous presence of the most noble materials of art: stone, bronze, wood. When it is said that the natural entity becomes the monument of its growth process, representing the zenith of its age, in Penone all this acquires the evidence of a successful artwork: many of its trees are *made of bronze*. In Penone the concept of *durée* manifests the double temporal projection of its meaning. “Duration” certainly indicates the age of the entity, its being the material memory of itself. But it also means permanence in the hostile changes of a future landscape. If something lasts, if something has a *duration*, it is because it projects its force of existence into the future. Only that which is *hard* (“*durus*”) ensures itself some duration. Penone writes: “The work is projected into the future, / is linked to the growth of the tree, to its existence. / The work is in progress; to own the work / it is necessary to live next to the tree that is its actor. / The mutation, the tree growth process / It is the experience of the work of art” (Penone 2022: 25). It is to the work of art – so Penone writes – that we can entrust the times of our existence: “I entrust the present of my existence to the work. / I entrust the past of my existence to work. / I entrust the future of my existence to work” (Penone 2022: 322).

8. Tasks for aesthetics

Nature is the place where matter takes time, or, in other words, it is the place where time coagulates in matter. Why can this path have any relevance, for the experience that humans have of nature, in this 21st century, already severely marked by challenging metamorphosis of biological balances? (See Brady 2021; Morton 2010) The basic problem presented here can be summarized as follows: we will not have a well-founded understanding and a well-founded experience of nature until we rediscover the *problem of time inscribed in the memorial vastness of its rhythms*. Rediscovering the hidden temporality of nature, rediscovering what Penone defined as “the subjective time of things”, means going beyond that paradigm that thinks of nature simply as a collection of physical data, as an ecological environment, or as a landscape to be preserved. All these determinations, very respectable in their specialized declinations, risk losing sight of the all-embracing sense of nature, which resides in *dominating* the short meters of human projects with the cosmic breath of its *longue durée*, with the cosmic inspiration of *aiôn*. The relationship between generations is thus removed from the mere calculation of human historicity, and returned to the generative rhythm of nature. As Penone suggests, “a different conception of time is the condition / To better grasp the reality of the growing tree and its fluidity. / Our adherence to the action of the tree presupposes / A changed interpretation of reality” (Penone 2022: 31). It is art (and its philosophical *organon*, i.e. Aesthetics) that suggests us to change our *reading* and our *experience* of reality (“one of the functions of art is the continuous rereading of reality”, Penone 2022: 31). The time has come to change our conception of time, digging into being, in search of long-lasting. It is only the feeling of the chronic vastness of *Physis* that can change our attitude towards nature, and give ourselves, and the generations to come, a chance to survive.

References

- Balme, D.M., *Genos and eidos in Aristotle's biology*, “The Classical Quarterly”, New Series, n. 1/12 (1962), pp. 81-98.
- Bergson, H., *Creative evolution*, trans. by A. Mitchell, New York, The Modern Library, 1944.
- Brady, E., *Global climate change and aesthetics*, “Environmental Values”, n. 1/30 (2021), pp. 27-46.

- Busine, L. (ed.), *Giuseppe Penone*, Milano, Electa, 2012.
- Busine, L., *Dans les jardins de Giuseppe Penone*, in Penone, G., *La structure du temps*, Annency, Dao-La Petite École, 1994, pp. 79-105.
- Cacciari, M., *Labirinto filosofico*, Milano, Adelphi, 2014.
- Chamovitz, D., *What a plant knows. A field guide to the sciences*, New York, Scientific American/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2012.
- Coccia, E., *La vita delle piante. Metafisica della mescolanza*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2018.
- Deleuze, G., *Bergsonism*, transl. by H. Tomlinson, B. Habberjam, New York, Zone Books, 1991.
- Didi-Huberman, G., *Être crane. Lieu, contact, pensée, sculpture*, Paris, Minuit, 2000.
- Ernout, A., Meillet, A., *Dictionnaire etymologique de la Langue Latine*, Paris, Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1951.
- Fechner, G.T., *Nanna oder über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen*, Leipzig, Leopold Voss, 1848.
- Goethe, J.W.v., *Werke*, Bd. 13, *Naturwissenschaftliche Schriften*, I, ed. by D. Kuhn, R. Wankmüller, München, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 2000.
- Hall, M., *Plants as persons. A philosophical botany*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2011.
- Ingold, T., *In the shadow of tree being. A walk with Giuseppe Penone*, in G. Penone, *The inner life of forms*, ed. by C. Basualdo, New York, Gagosian/Rizzoli International Publications, 2018, pp. 61-78.
- Ingold, T., *Correspondences*, London, Polity, 2021.
- Ingold, T., *The life of lines*, London, Routledge, 2015.
- Ingold, T., Palsson, G. (eds.), *Biosocial becomings. Integrating social and biological anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Janowski, M., Ingold, T. (eds.), *Imagining landscapes. Past, present and future*, Abingdon, Ashgate, 2012.
- Kohn, E., *How forests think. Toward an anthropology beyond the human*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2013.
- Mancuso, S., *La nazione delle piante*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2019.
- Marder, M., *Plant-thinking. A philosophy of vegetal life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Miller, E.P., *The vegetative soul. From philosophy of nature to subjectivity in the feminine*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Morton, T., *The ecological thought*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2010.
- Penone, G., *Alberi in versi*, Firenze-Milano, Giunti, 2021.
- Penone, G., *Scritti*, ed. by F. Stocchi, Milano, Electa, 2022.
- Penone, G., *The inner life of forms*, ed. by C. Basualdo, New York, Gagosian/Rizzoli International Publications, 2018.

Penone, G., *La structure du temps*, Annency, Dao/La Petite École, 1994.

Pliny the Elder, *Natural history*, transl. by H. Rackham, W.H.S. Jones, D.E. Eichholz, London, Heinemann, 1938-62.

Repici, L., *Uomini capovolti. Le piante nel pensiero dei Greci*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 2000.

Settis, S., *Sculpting time*, in G. Penone, *The inner life of forms*, ed. by C. Basualdo, New York, Gagosian/Rizzoli International Publications, 2018, pp. 145-67.

Settis, S., *Incurzioni. Arte contemporanea e tradizione*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2020.

Woodcox, A., *Aristotle's theory of aging*, "Cahiers des études anciennes", LV (2018), pp. 65-78.

Zatta, C., *Interconnectedness. The living world of the early Greek philosophers*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin, 2017.