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Carlo Michelstaedter: The Tragedy of Thought

Daniela Bini

The silence that surrounded the death of Carlo Michelstaedter in 1910 can be explained in the light of the Italian cultural climate of the time, which was dominated by Benedetto Croce. In Croce's philosophical system, based on the strict separation between the human faculties, there was no space for a personality like Michelstaedter's whose aim was the abolition of this very separation. He was, in fact, a philosopher, a painter and a poet, constantly changing his mode of expression in an ever frustrating attempt to grasp the essence of life and to find the perfect expressive form.¹

Born in Gorizia in 1887 into a Jewish family of high cultural tradition, Carlo Michelstaedter was a spokesman of that complex Middle-European culture. Although he spent his most productive years in Florence where he attended the university, and although he considered himself Italian, he did not take part in the philosophical movement of the time—his scorn for Croce was

open.² Besides the Greek philosophers whom he studied at the university, he was strongly influenced by northern thinkers: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Dostojevski, Ibsen, and by Beethoven's music.

Michelstaedter killed himself in 1910, at 23. The reason for his action, as is often the case with suicides, remains purely speculative. Yet he left enough material to give some support to conjectures on the existential crisis that brought him to his precocious end.³

In a letter to his sister Paula, who, like the Paolina of Leopardi, was also his confidant, Carlo made a lucid diagnosis of his illness:

It is in part an individual condition, in part the illness of the age [*la malattia dell'epoca*] insofar as moral balance is concerned, because we are presently living in an age in which changes in society seem to go hand-in-hand with a dissolution of all bonds . . . and the pathways of existence are no longer sharply drawn . . . and it depends upon personal initiative to create the luminous path through universal chaos.⁴

He was only 19 then, but had already clearly analyzed a disease which was historical and for which there was no cure. He was totally aware of living in the era of God's death, as Nietzsche had stated, and with the death of God, of the end of all absolutes and eternal truths; the end, that is, of all the myths created by man. Schopenhauer had opened to him the path in this direction and Nietzsche must have accompanied him through it. Carlo, however, is also able to perform self-analysis, to look into himself and to discover his own weaknesses, or dark side. In the same letter, in fact, he writes:

I suffer because I feel cowardly, weak, because I see myself as incapable of controlling things and people as I am incapable of controlling the ideas that race through my head . . . the way I have no control over my passions; because I have no moral balance . . . because I have no intellectual equilibrium, so that thought goes straight to its goal . . . because . . . everything is slipping through my hands . . . and more and more I'm convinced that I am but a degenerate. (*Epistolario* 157)

Carlo's tragedy was that he could not accept his weakness, neither could he accept the small lot that destiny had assigned him and all other human beings. He strove to imitate the great *persuasi* of history: Socrates and Christ, who freed themselves from con-

tingency and in whom the coincidence of thought and action, theory and practice was realized.

Carlo writes a whole thesis to try to understand and explain his idea of *Persuasione* and its opposite, *Rettorica*. The thesis had begun as an examination of these two concepts in Plato and Aristotle, but it soon left the two Greek philosophers behind. Carlo's frustration is apparent from the start. *Persuasione*, his goal, his life model, not only cannot be achieved, but cannot even be defined, except negatively and through metaphors. Although it is man's main goal, he can achieve it only through death. Its essence, in fact, is contradictory to that of physical life.

His metaphor of the weight well exemplifies it. The essence of the weight is to fall; this is its will, destined to be frustrated. Were the weight, in fact, to reach its goal, to fulfill its need, that is, falling, it would be falling to its end, stasis, in other words the opposite of its essence.

So it is with man's essence: "I know I want," writes Michelstaedter, "and I do not have what I want".⁵ Man's essence, thus, as Leopardi had already said, consists in his will, in his desire; it consists in a lack, in a nonbeing, in an infinite and never-ending tension. Man desires the absolute, which does not exist, or it exists only as a tension because, like for the weight, if it existed it would cease to be an absolute. Its essence, therefore, is negative and Michelstaedter states it clearly when he explains:

I have never known what the absolute is, yet I know it the way the insomniac knows sleep, the way the beholder of darkness knows light. This I know, that my conscience . . . is made up of lack [è fatta di deficienza]. (*Persuasione* 96)

Yet, continues Carlo, the real "persuaso" is he who needs nothing from outside for he has all in himself (44).

This extreme position is doomed to be frustrated, and Carlo knows it well. Man *needs* others and the world outside; his being is determined by that of others. He is so certain of the impossibility of achieving *Persuasione* that he calls the second chapter of his work "L'illusione della persuasione." This "illusion" is born when man transforms that which exists only for himself, that which is good only for himself into objective entities, into the absolute good. In Chapter 3, where he tries to show the "route to Persuasion," his fatal destiny becomes evident.

Twenty pages extremely rich in images, metaphors, parables. The use of the Gospels, as well as of the Greek texts, is constant.

Statements are presented, with the authority of axioms, as absolute truths, unshakable and indubitable. Yet they are totally abstract and detached from reality. They culminate in the maxim "to give is to do the impossible; to give is to receive" (82). Man must affirm himself not in order to continue to exist, "he must love the world not because it is necessary to his own needs, but for what it is, in itself" (82). In short he must live without relation with the other, without "weight," having escaped the law of gravity, that is, having overcome that law which bodies obeyed and in which their nature or essence consists. This he must do, not as Plato did, trying to reach the absolute by clinging to his body, but as Socrates and Christ, renouncing their bodies, in the recognition that man must deny his physical being in order to obtain his absolute one.

Michelstaedter seems to hope for a return to Parmenides,⁶ a position which, as Campailla intelligently points out, finds today a fertile ground in the philosophy of Emanuele Severino, but which, nevertheless, has strong opponents in the philosophers of "Il Pensiero Debole" whose leading exponent is Gianni Vattimo.⁷ Vattimo, faithful follower of Heidegger, states, in line with hermeneutics: "Non si da' essere se non come evento, come accadere di orizzonti linguistici, entro cui gli enti ci divengono accessibili; l'essere è solo questo accadere e il suo tramandarsi."⁸ Against Parmenides: "being is not . . . rather, it 'happens'," that is "becomes." Being, therefore, exists insofar as it becomes; it exists as "becoming."⁹

Michelstaedter's wish, however, is the desperate illusion of one aware of the impossibility of its ever becoming true. He too believed that one can know "being" only through "becoming," as he was aware of the impossibility of achieving *Persuasione*, or consistency with the Parmenidean *on* for it would exclude "becoming," and therefore the life of nature. Yet he could not abandon the belief in an absolute being, never changing, self-contained, self-sufficient, and, what was more, he could not renounce the desire of making his own self into it. It was this dichotomy that tore him in two. He lived it more intensely than other thinkers since he himself had such a physical, sensual nature.

The *Epistolario* is the best source for this important aspect of Michelstaedter's personality. The hundreds of letters written at home and to his intimate friends clearly show the intensity of his sensuality and physical being, which he let come out with little restraint. It immediately appears evident how much Carlo treasures and cultivates this side of himself: his exhausting mountain climbing, his passion for dancing ("a physical pleasure, an un-

matched voluptuousness" he calls it [*Epistolario* 98]), his long swims in the rough waters of the Isonzo which made him famous and proud, and his frustrations when an injury to his leg blocked him at home for some time. He was constantly pushing himself to the limits of his capabilities, and nature was his beloved playground. There he had the illusion of reaching that absolute that as a social being he never could even approach.

The letter written at home describing the funeral of Carducci succeeds perhaps better than others in pointing out this aspect of Carlo's nature. It does it with the force created by a contrast. The main subject, in fact, is death, yet its end is a hymn to sensual life. Carlo loves Bologna for its richness, abundance, fullness of life. The qualifiers he chooses to describe it are self-explanatory:

I think of Bologna again, of the past three days; they appear to be an oasis of a superior *sun and life*, so *intense*, that I'll be scarred by it for the rest of my life. But then, I love Bologna, with its porticos, its beautiful *dark-red* piazzos, its beautiful *vast* piazzas, its *imposing* San Petronio church, its *lively* movement . . . of *happy* people everywhere in *throngs* to see and to be seen enjoying life. I love the *generous* and sincere cordiality of the people, I like the *teeming public places*, full of life and *warmth*, and . . . more than anything else, I love its women, *opulent*, *radiant* with life, who *smile* when smiled at, and who seem to give themselves entirely through the glance [*sguardo*]. (186) [My Emphasis]

We seem almost to be listening to the voice of Zeno Cosini, another lover of intense living, women and action, and likewise a victim of thought and reflection.

Carlo too is fully aware of this dichotomy of action and thought. He shows it when he writes to Paula: "Above all, I think of my body, it is important to me," and a few paragraphs later: "I must stop talking about myself, because I must stop looking into myself—it can be intellectually useful, but it's not healthy" (305, 306). Again it is Zeno who comes to mind with his theory that thought and self-analysis paralyze action and make it impossible.¹⁰ The "intellectually useful" thus coincides with the physically damaging. Zeno, however, makes his choice and accepts its consequences: he will be a paralytic thinker, and when he will decide to follow his impulse and pursue a woman, he will just do it without trying to rationalize it. And he even laughs at himself. Carlo cannot choose, neither can he laugh nor accept the necessity of compromise. In his Nietzschean dream of asserting himself as the *über-Mensch*, he prefers death to compromise.

To his great friend Gaetano Chiavacci, Carlo writes a beautiful letter where he explains his torment. It's a letter written from Gorizia describing the days spent vacationing at Pirano with Paula and the Cassini sisters. Days of physical activities: walking, climbing, swimming, sailing, dancing; where even talking is purposely reduced to a minimum in order to live more intensely the life of nature (*Epistolario* 331). Carlo's enjoyment and fulfillment are evident. The descriptions are detailed together with those of the nature which was the perfect background of the activities and with which Carlo seems to reach a perfect union.

The appealing offer made to him by some fishermen to remain with them and live on the sea, though not taken seriously, makes Carlo feel that he is part of that nature. But Carlo is also a creature of thought. The beautiful comparison of his brain to the sea conveys all the power and intensity of Carlo's chaotic needs and feelings:

My mind is like an undulating sea that reflects all lights, that mirrors . . . all the skies . . . but that shatters them all at the focal point—but the bottom remains murky and dark . . . certainly I have what the sea has not: I have the uninterrupted torment of bygone intentions and of future commitments, of the different and unfulfilled yearnings: the consciousness of my meaninglessness [*nullità*] in this world regulated by actions as well as by thought and art; of life dissolving awaiting what? In the illusion of a progressive shaping [*formarsi*] that does not exist. (330)

The image could not have been more effective. The sea, symbol of the force, vitality, infinity and freedom of nature, is here made to coincide (or at least Carlo is trying to make it do so) with the intellectual, spiritual absolute. But this attempt is bound to fail; the two can never coincide.

Carlo's brain is like the sea with its strength, force, freedom, but also with its dark, irrational, turbid side. The brain-sea image proves his nonacceptance to be only like the sea or the fisherman, and his need and continuous attempt to be everything: nature and spirit, action and ideal to a degree of perfection. And frustration follows frustration. "I realize with growing terror that I am condemned to staying outside of the intensity, passion, greatness of life, and that I will never have a way of living it within me" (331). And in his depression he admits: "There would be nothing left for me to do than a physical violent life, go wandering on horseback through the plains and rest at night in a tent counting the stars." Leopardi's presence is powerful, as is this ultimate negative response to this rhetorical proposition. As for the Leopardi-

dian shepherd, the life of nature is not enough for Carlo, yet intellectual fulfillment escapes him:

There is no possibility for me to embrace a larger whole. . . . So I am unable to think or write or paint; I loathe myself . . . I am so unhappy—and I see no chance of anything changing except to get worse. (336-37)

Carlo's complete awareness of this tension within himself is even more evident when his good friend Rico leaves on a ship for the American adventure. He feels admiration and envy. So well can he analyze his contradictory feelings that, writing to Nino about their common friend, he comments: "la lettera di Rico . . . mi mise il fuoco addosso per quanto penso a noi, che, invidiandolo, siamo impediti nel volerlo raggiungere dalle stesse cose che c'impedirono di partir con lui" (436). But Carlo belongs only in part to "the race of those who remain on earth."¹¹ And this was to be his tragedy.

The one hundred polemical pages Carlo devotes to "la Rettorica" are dictated by his strong need for authenticity and his hatred of hypocrisy and empty words. He can finally be effective, as he could never be in talking about "Persuasione," for he has a solid ground on which to move and real foes to attack. His tone is highly sarcastic, even vitriolic. Here he pours out his own frustrations as a man. "Persuasione" cannot be achieved and it is useless even to speak about it, since, as he teaches, "Persuasione" cannot be put into words—it will necessarily transform itself into "Rettorica"—but it must be lived. Now he can finally say with plenty of examples what "Rettorica" is. He appears as a great rhetorician—hence his poison and fury. In his very fight against "Rettorica," he is caught in it.

The life of "Persuasione" is thus unattainable; man becomes lost in his search for it. He needs help and clings to something or someone; he asks to be *for* someone. "Owing to his illusion, he calls what 'is' what 'is for him'; he calls it good or bad according to whether he likes it or dislikes it" (*Persuasione* 97). He creates "Rettorica" *malgré lui*. It seems hard to believe how Michelstaedter, caught in this impasse, refused to overcome it by accepting it, as the only possible way for man to be. Although he affirmed that "l'uomo deve accontentarsi del segno convenzionale che nasconde l'oscurità" (101), he himself could never accept darkness, and continued to fight for the inexistent light. He knew, however, that the only light obtainable in this world is the one of he who "turns himself into flame."¹²

The step Carlo could not or did not want to take was instead taken by Heidegger as he asserted the linguistic essence of being, and his followers are today continuing in this line. Truth "has no metaphysical or logical nature, only a rhetorical one," says G. Vattimo. "Truth is the result of interpretation . . . because it is only in the interpretative process that truth constitutes itself."¹³ This is hermeneutics, today's philosophy, which "in inheriting and bringing to its ultimate consequences a diffuse tendency in twentieth-century thought, it concentrates on the relationship between language and being, and on the interpretive characteristic of all of existence."¹⁴ Vattimo calls his new philosophy "the weak ontology" or the "pluralistic ontology" in which plurality is not a moment to be rescued and overcome in a higher synthesis, in a final unity, but it is a permanent condition.¹⁵ He well sees the relation of such a position with the rediscovery of the tragic element of the human condition, characteristic of some neoexistentialist modern philosophy like that of Pareyson and Cacciari. But after all, as D. Antiseri says, this "weak thought" has its strength, which lies in "its capability of understanding its limit."¹⁶

The discourse developed by Heidegger and his followers is a theoretical discourse. Being exists only in its becoming and its relation to us interpreters. The Parmenidean *on* does not exist, or to be more precise, it does not concern us because even if it existed we could not know it. This discovery guides men in their theoretical as well as practical life: a life which must be accepted with its limits and lived within them.

Michelstaedter, who followed this theoretical discourse up to the end, could not renounce the Parmenidean *on*, well aware that, having followed his reasoning coherently, the possession of the absolute *on* would be impossible—a contradiction in terms. He well knew that *Persuasione* is an *aporia*. His attempt, therefore, was to move it from the dangerous grounds of theoretics to those of practice.¹⁷ *Persuasione* cannot be known and expressed through concepts—it would transform itself into *Rettorica*; it must be lived. It is not the *knowledge* of the absolute that must be sought, but the *life* of the absolute.

He therefore continues his search. Socrates and Christ had taught man to renounce the finite, material side of his nature, to affirm himself as a self-contained and self-sufficient being, with no needs for and dependence on the external world. Since life *is* needs, the negation of all needs is death. The finite individual who wants himself infinite knows that he can only be it through the destruction of his finite, empirical being.

Although nobody can ascertain the reasons behind Michelstaedter's suicide, it must be said, to pay justice to a victim of honest thought, that his rigorous logic had brought him to the conclusion that

Only when you do not want will you have what you want, because what you want is absolute being, and your will is all but contingency: it is not in itself . . . as long as it will be, your body will cast a shadow so that you cannot see; when you will no longer be, you will have the possibility of seeing. (*Opere* 781)¹⁸

So he chose to be no more.

1. Studies on Michelstaedter concentrate mainly on his philosophy. Sergio Campailla is the only scholar who has tried to examine extensively the rest of his production. See his *Pensiero e poesia di Carlo Michelstaedter* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1973) and excellent edition of Michelstaedter's collected poems: *Poesie* (Bologna: Pàtron, 1974). He also gathered his drawings and paintings in a handsome book and wrote an enlightening introduction, *Carlo Michelstaedter, Opera grafica e pittorica* (Gorizia: Istituto per gli Incontri Culturali Mitteleuropei, Arti Grafiche Campestri, 1975). For a comparative analysis of Michelstaedter's philosophy, poetry and painting, see my article "Michelstaedter tra 'Persuasione' e 'Rettorica,'" *Italica* 4 (1986) 346-60.

2. His caustic remarks against Croce are in "Scritti Vari," Carlo Michelstaedter, *Opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1958) 245, 226-62, 837.

3. As Brianese clearly summarizes in his book on Michelstaedter, critics have since 1910 been divided on the issue of his suicide. Those who have called it "philosophical" or "metaphysical" see it as the final act, in line with his theoretical beliefs. Those instead who have read Michelstaedter as praising life and action against theory and reflection, see it as his moment of weakness. Giorgio Brianese, *L'arco e il destino. Interpretazione di Michelstaedter* (Abano Terme: Francisci, 1985) 83.

4. Carlo Michelstaedter, *Epistolario* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983) 158.

5. Carlo Michelstaedter, *La Persuasione e la Rettorica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1982) 39. In the text it will be abbreviated as *Persuasione*.

6. Recently there has been a polemic between scholars about Michelstaedter's return to Parmenides. E. Severino and his disciple G. Brianese consider Michelstaedter's Eleatism as a misunderstanding of Parmenides since the Parmenidean *on* is a metaphysical entity which can only be known. F. Fratta, on the other hand, tries to interpret Michelstaedter's search for the *on* in an anti-metaphysical direction, where the aim is practical and not theoretical. Fratta's interpretation will be examined later. Francesco Fratta, *Il dovere dell'essere. Critica della metafisica e stanza etica in Carlo Michelstaedter* (Milan: Unicopli, 1986) 158-59.

7. Sergio Campailla points it out in his Introduction to *La Persuasione* 19.

8. Gianni Vattimo, in *Dove va la filosofia italiana?* (Bari: Laterza, 1986) 190.
9. Gianni Vattimo, *Il pensiero debole* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1985) 19. An English translation by Peter Carravetta is forthcoming from Johns Hopkins University Press.
10. The humorous scene of the "fifty-four muscles set in motion in just half a second" in a single step well exemplifies it. It shows as well, however, the distance between the two writers. Svevo's detachment from his own actions gives him the ability of analyzing and of laughing at them. It is this very capability to laugh that helps him to overcome the crisis brought about by the discovery of life's senselessness. Italo Svevo, *Confessions of Zeno*, trans. by Beryl De Zoete (New York: Vintage Books, 1958) 94.
11. Eugenio Montale, *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 1977) 23.
12. "Dialogo delle salute," *Opere* 781. The same words appear at the closing of "Della Persuasione" (*Persuasione* 88).
13. *Il pensiero debole* 26 (translation mine)
14. *Dove va la filosofia italiana?* 188. In his recent volume *Ascoltare il silenzio*, Paolo Valesio, continuing on the same line, points out the necessity to rid *rettorica* of its pejorative connotations and, instead, to see it as the real philosophical activity, since it "riflette e celebra la creatività umana dentro la lingua—le possibilità, apparentemente sconfinite, di esprimersi nel mondo." It is this *rettorica*, he continues later, "che succede alla filosofia, la retorica . . . che sottentra alla filosofia esaurita" (Bologna: il Mulino, 1986) 295, 349.
15. *Ibid.* 192. The translation is mine.
16. *Ibid.* 171.
17. Campailla had already pointed out the importance of ethics in Michelstaedter and this theme was developed in my essay (see note 1) where the relationship between Leopardi and Michelstaedter together with his great admiration for Socrates and Christ were analyzed. The importance of ethics is also the core of Francesco Fratta's recent book. In it he calls the route to Persuasione "the categorical imperative" which must direct the life of the "persuaso." "La persuasione," he writes, "è una dimensione altra, che nessun linguaggio umano potrà mai giungere ad esprimere. Da un punto di vista teoretico è un concetto irrimediabilmente aporetico. Essa è conosciuta soltanto . . . da coloro che sanno che nulla, in ciò che esiste, è veramente reale e che il valore della vita è tutto nella liberazione dall'illusione del sè" (op. cit. 156, 169). It is hard to explain, however, why Fratta refused to connect this conclusion with Michelstaedter's suicide.
18. Brianese's conclusion seems more coherent with the development of Michelstaedter's thought than Fratta's. Commenting on his awareness of the impossibility to live the life of Persuasione ("l'impossibile superamento della finitezza da parte del finito"), he sees *Persuasione* as "l'ideale-limite cui l'uomo non potrà mai giungere, ma al quale non per questo deve cessare di tendere." The real "persuaso," he continues, "non-è-più. La vita, dunque, è inevitabilmente retorica. . . . La persuasione, in quanto tenta di negare la volontà di continuare (nella quale la vita consiste) è l'atto in cui la vita stessa è estinta" (op. cit. 71, 72, 80). In his interesting essay *La differenza ebraica. Ebraismo e Grecità in Michelstaedter* (Bologna: Cappelli, 1984) Piero Pieri reaches the same conclusion.