



## A century, a decade and a year of Carlo Michelstaedter.

Un siglo, una década y un año de Carlo Michelstaedter.

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### ABSTRACT

Carlo Michelstaedter (Gorizia, 1887-1910) left a singular trail in the Italian philosophy of the early 20th century. Almost one hundred and eleven years after his demise, his suicide, one can still discuss the influence of the Italian thinker, the vitality of their topics and the depth of their thinking. Our purpose is to know the figure that subsists behind the thinker of Persuasion and Rhetoric. In accordance with this objective, we will make a tour of his philosophical, epistolary and poetic work, which is certainly not enough. However, it will help us to shed light on the fascinating creation of the last doctor of nihilism, the last great diagnosis of the profound lack of sense that carried the second part of the S. XIX and inaugurated the first decade of the S. XX. In the form of an elegy, perhaps even an ode, we will remember the Italian philosopher in these times, for he remains a fruitful, unfinished and extremely mysterious undertaking. In conclusion, we will try to defend Michelstaedter from merely suicidal readings and approach a four-time interpretation of the Italian philosopher.

**Keywords:** Persuasion. Rhetoric. Nihilism. Pessimism. Suicide. Michelstaedter.

### RESUMEN

Carlo Michelstaedter (Gorizia, 1887-1910) dejó una estela singular en la filosofía italiana de principios del S. XX. A casi ciento once años de su fenecimiento, de su suicidio, todavía se



puede discutir la influencia del pensador italiano, la vitalidad de sus tópicos y la profundidad de su pensamiento. Nuestro propósito será conocer la figura que subsiste detrás del pensador de *La persuasión y la retórica*. En virtud de este objetivo, realizaremos un recorrido por su obra filosófica, epistolar y poética, que sin dudas no basta; sin embargo, nos ayudará a echar luz sobre la fascinante creación del último médico del nihilismo, el último gran diagnóstico de la honda falta de sentido que acarrió la segunda parte del S. XIX e inauguró la primera década del S. XX. Al modo de una elegía, quizá también de una oda, recordaremos al filósofo italiano en estos tiempos, ya que sigue siendo una empresa fructífera, inacabada y sumamente misteriosa. En conclusión, intentaremos defender a Michelstaedter de las lecturas meramente suicidas y nos aproximaremos hacia una interpretación en cuatro tiempos del filósofo italiano.

**Palabras claves:** Persuasión. Retórica. Nihilismo. Pesimismo. Suicidio. Michelstaedter

Il ne faut pas abandonner le suicide à des gens malheureux  
qui risquent de le gâcher et d'en faire une misère<sup>1</sup>  
"Un plaisir aussi simple", Michel Foucault, 1979, p. 779

## Introduction

Carlo Michelstaedter was born in Gorizia on June 3, 1887. Twenty-three years later, on October 17, 1910, staying briefly in his native home, he finds the horizon of his Life, infinity stalks him and he decides to answer the call of a theory that is only theory as action. The search for the absolute becomes about itself, it is tangible, it is experience: "L'assoluto non l'ho mai conosciuto, ma lo conosco così come chi soffre d'insonnia conosce il sonno, come chi guarda l'oscurità conosce la luce"<sup>2</sup> (Michelstaedter, 1995, p. 55). But his youth should not create in us a prejudice, but rather a laugh, an amazing curiosity and a crackling seriousness. By simple chance, Michelstaedter belonged to a generation of supposed "early suicides", if it is worth mentioning this tautology, composed of two other fleeting geniuses, such as Otto Weininger and George Trakl. The geographical proximity must also add an element for those who like to make such a comparison, although the landscape described

<sup>1</sup> "We must not abandon suicide to unhappy people who risk spoiling it and turning it into misery." \*Unless otherwise noted, translations are their own.

<sup>2</sup> "I didn't know the absolute, but I do know. I know it as one who suffers from insomnia and knows sleep, as one who, by looking in the dark, knows the light."



by the Triestine in his copious correspondence always refers us to beautiful and familiar places. What do we have left? Perhaps, to trace a chronological journey, a kind of *biography of relations* of Carlo Michelstaedter? To make a deferred eulogy for a space that exceeds the century of duration? To deal with two or three of his key concepts for the history of philosophy? To talk about his exemplary Death? None of these questions is necessary, but neither are they inopportune in this situation to delve into the figure that Michelstaedter offers us, beyond his Death, as if in a séance of spiritualism – which is what we do when doing philosophy – we looked for the return to extract what Deleuze intended to expose – and I return to spiritualism – with the "creation of concepts". As if it were a game between virtuality and actuality, concepts that are not easily exhausted, that have, to an ontological degree, an incessant exhaustiveness. Everything we can do here and now will correspond, as Michelstaedter reminds us when reading the preface to his doctoral thesis, which is both an indictment and a request of principle, to the domain of rhetoric:

[...] lo lo so che parlo perché parlo ma che non persuaderò nessuno; e questa è disonestà — ma la rettorica anagkázhei me taûta drân bía — o in altre parole 'è pur necessario che se uno ha addentato una perfida sorba la risputi'<sup>3</sup> (Michelstaedter, 1995, p. 3).

Even so, as he finally admits under the tragic aspect: we cannot evade the poison that rhetoric supposes, that language supposes in its total expression. "Con le parole guerra alle parole"<sup>4</sup> (Michelstaedter, 1995, p. 134), thus begins the posthumous writing that is conformed by the appendices to his great work, his doctoral thesis never defended, *La persuasione e la rettorica*. This study was a change in Michelstaedter's life. So let us allow ourselves to talk something about his origins and relationships, and then move on to a few topics that articulate his *magnum opus* and, finally, address the Michelstaedter "case".

<sup>3</sup> "I know I speak because I speak, but I won't persuade anyone. This question is dishonest, but the rhetoric 'compels me to do so', in other words, 'it is necessary for him who has bitten a disgusting fruit to spit it out.'"

<sup>4</sup> "With words, war on words"



## I

We can mention somewhat anecdotally that he was born into a wealthy Triestine and Hebrew family. His parents were Alberto and Emma, he had three siblings, Gino, Paula and Elda. As a young man he was an introvert and devoted much of his time to poetry, music, *design* and not much else. He did not excel in the first letters, nor at the end of his basic instruction, having a performance that we could call "unsatisfactory". At the beginning of his academic life, he moved to Vienna to study mathematics, although soon after, in October 1905, he moved to Firenze (Michelstaedter, 2010, pp. 26-30) and enrolled in *Lettere* at the Istituto di Studi Superiori. We know little about their relationships, beyond the proper names of girlfriends or "friends", Iolanda De Blasi, Nadia Baraden and Argia Cassini, and some correspondence addressed to them;<sup>5</sup> the same goes for his friends, Enrico Mreule, Nino Paternolli, Gaetano Chiavacci and Vladimiro Arangio-Ruiz.<sup>6</sup> That is, we can only recreate relationships to the extent that we have vast epistolary references and the occasional posthumous evocation.<sup>7</sup> However, and attending mainly to two crucial moments of his life, we can specify a little more the bulk of his ties. Michelstaedter's friendly, familiar and jovial writing begins to show its dark face at a precise moment, in a letter addressed to his friend Chiavacci on February 26, 1909, where we can read: "il mio fratello di New York è morto. —Morto per un maledetto accidente, e ora dopo due settimane non sappiamo niente di più. È da impazzire"<sup>8</sup> (Michelstaedter, 2010, p. 372). Taking into account that the first missives we have from February 1909 are also addressed to Chiavacci, we

<sup>5</sup> In addition to a short pseudobiographic fiction novel written by the curator of his work, Sergio Campailla (2010).

<sup>6</sup> The latter will also act as its editors on the occasion of the first publication of *La persuasione e la rettorica* (1913; Genova: Formigini, a cura di V. Arangio-Ruiz) and the main compilation of his writings in *Operate* (1958; Firenze: Sansoni, a cura da Chiavacci). We can add to these two editions that made by his cousin, Emilio Michelstaedter (1922; Firenze: Vallecchi, a cura da Emilio Michelstaedter), and a last one by Maria Raschini (1972). Thus, we have four posthumous editions of *La persuasione e la rettorica*, until, in the decades of the 70-80, Sergio Campailla made the critical edition of the "complete" of his poetic, philosophical, pictorial and epistolary work. To subvert these, and more sticking to the edition of Chiavacci and the *Manoscritto "C"*, the critical edition by Andrea Comincini, edited by Joker in 2015.

<sup>7</sup> As with the notes left by Emilio, the preface to *Operate* (1958), the first biography of the Goriziano written by Campailla (1974).

<sup>8</sup> "My brother from New York is dead. He died in a damn accident, and now, after two weeks, we don't know anything else. It's crazy."



can figure that the exchange with his friend corresponds both to the death of his brother and to the production of his thesis, of his posthumous work. This is how we read in a letter sent by Carlo at the beginning of that fateful month: "Per quello spiraglio della rettorica ho contemplato sew tanto più interessanti —amaramente interessanti che ora mi secca maledettamente limitarmi a quella meschinità — ma: *omnia in omni!! ... et omnia nihil*"<sup>9</sup> (Michelstaedter, 2010, p. 370). But this idea was foreshadowed in the young man some time before, approximately in May of the previous year, when he told his father that, on the occasion of a school philological work, the only thing that interested him was the relationship between "eloquence" and "rhetoric" in Brunetto Latini's translation of the speech *Pro Q. Ligario Oratio* of the great Cicero (La Rocca, 2011).

Undoubtedly, the genesis of the text is chaotic, no less happens with its writing, and if we follow the chronological division that Chiavacci makes of his work in the introduction of *Opere* (1958), we can find that the years 1908-1909 would correspond to a kind of "assolutto pessimismo" ("absolute pessimism") that culminates in 1910, when thought ceases to be theory to become "immanent criterion to action, life in act" (Michelstaedter, 1958, p. xiv). This is attested to by several epistles, such as the one addressed to Enrico Mreule on June 13, 1909, where he extensively exposes his theory of the *gymné psykhé* ("naked soul"), or the one destined for Chiavacci, of April 25, 1910, where fatigue leads him to label a drawing of his room with a legend in Greek: "*têde dè egò mèn bión ábion diabióo érgon dè méga phyēi*"<sup>10</sup> (Michelstaedter, C., 2010, p. 463, note 2). It would be enough to give a literary "low blow" and reread the last letter that Carlo wrote to his mother, dated September 10, 1910, where the quality of the writing demonstrates what Chiavacci mentions at the step: the theory becomes an act, it stops seeing (and being a spectacle) to be. Just as it is taken for granted that we read of our own free will, perhaps even for pleasure, but as a violent act, we listen to music without hardly intending it and inevitably. That is, the passage from *theorêîn* to real *philosophy*, that is, the one that is wanted not by itself or its breadth of field, but by its action, for its

<sup>9</sup> "Because of the crack of rhetoric I contemplated things so interesting, bitterly interesting, that now it irritates me to dedicate myself only to that pettiness, although: everything is in everything!... and it's all nothing."

<sup>10</sup> "Here, where I live a life that cannot be lived, a great work springs up."



good. Likewise, Carlo's relationships are marked by this marked tendency towards a productive will. In this way, and to finish with the intricacy of Carlo's relationships, we give way to a perhaps more conflictive section: persuasion and rhetoric.

## II

In a sense, we have already begun to diagram the main structure of the work: hesitations around everything that we can call "inauthentic", "fictitious", "social", as opposed to what we say "authentic", "individual" and, in short, "*philosophia perennis*". Michelstaedter expresses a fervent spirit that stands against the moderns and — let me generalize here — the Germans; neither futuristic nor Dannunzian, much less Hegelian. But it is also not surprising that he does not recognize himself as Nietzschean, at all. Nietzsche is still *very positive* to understand the value behind his finding, behind his critique of German historicism, as he does in *On the Usefulness and Harm of History to Life* (second untimely) as well as during the beginning of his life as an author. There is no method in Carlo Michelstaedter, and that is simply reprehensible, but there is a struggle, a search, a purpose. It does not recognize itself as modern and that is why it does not treat its time with "justice"; part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire is not recognized, its German roots are not respected; he does not recognize himself as rhetorical, he tries to assume the weight and property of persuasion. If we turn to his writings, not only to his letters, but mainly to *La persuasione e la rettorica* we will find a game of pastiche, a palimpsest that brings together several languages and sources not only in its materiality (Italian, Greek, Latin, German), but also in its style (direct, formal, alliterated, interrupted, with medium scripts) and interests (philosophy, poetry, tragedy, mathematics, chemistry). It resists writing, makes it murky and almost ominous, but it is because persuasion requires the same thing in order not to be rhetorical. Michelstaedter makes us think of the character that Kafka is today: a Czech Jew — by extension, Austro-Hungarian — who wrote in German at the beginning of the last century. But the melting pot becomes even richer in Carlo (Benvegnù, 2016), where the *minor writing* experience occurs at every turn. Not only because he published during his life only four newspaper articles (one without his express consent), but also because he faces a double distance: he does not want to be a



schoolboy, he does not want to be vulgar. We have to point out, too, that his own native Gorizia is a mosaic of cultures of the rich and stormy *Mitteleuropa*.

In effect, Michelstaedter's struggle turns to two distinct bands. "Rhetoric" designates everything that allows us *to stay alive*; society, the homeland, order, laws, but also work, philosophy as a search to increase knowledge, the church with its rituals, science and its reified subjects. With this term we can understand everything that is improper, impersonal, obtuse, that is always done with a view to a future and that has a past well in mind; in short, everything that will never be an end. It is what makes language a trap, since in its main purpose (to communicate = to convince) it violates its conditions of possibility: it is recreated in deceptive formulas that seek a petty objective.

The persuaded mode evades this question, because it does not even remain in its field (the rhetorical field) but operates according to another logic, that of the present, that of the conscious and proper being. The persuaded man must establish a situation where his communication, instead of convincing, seeks something different: it is the message of Jesus, of Buddha – which they never wrote – but also that of Ibsen: you do not have to imitate to be a disciple, the good disciple is dedicated to follow. And that is why after the aforementioned quotation from the preface ("*lo lo so che parlo...*") of his thesis, he adds: "Eppure quanto io dico è stato detto tante volte e con tale forza che pare impossibile che il mondo abbia ancor continuato ogni volta dopo che erano suonate quelle parole" (Michelstaedter, 1995, p. 3). And of course, it refers to Jesus and Buddha, as I said, who succumb in their message in front of the theological building, but also to the classical Greeks, to Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, who formed a catalog of naturists for Aristotle, and not to mention Socrates or Beethoven, who were interpreted, wounded and digested (systematically in both cases, either according to philosophical "tradition" or counterpoint).

Thus, the persuaded have, as a figure that draws limits, a moral conscience that is his own, abandoning the axiological plexuses so expensive for society, for civilization. Before, knowledge and thinking were one and the same, Carlo tells us. There was no large closet to place mummified ideas. This is why philosophy is conceived as the last of the bastions of rhetoric: Plato and Aristotle were its main architects. It is worth mentioning that the initial title of his doctoral thesis was *I concetti da*





*persuasione e rettorica in Platone ed Aristotele*, purported doxographic work, which later became an ontological, psychological, social and linguistic treatise. Michelstaedter's thought does not neglect the role of philology, at all, less if one reviews the *Appendici Critiche*, a place where he collects and comments on passages from Platonic and Aristotelian works, but he does extend his work to an impossible thesis, an enterprise that he recognizes as such.

To round off, two diverse and antagonistic modes are those that articulate the vital possibility: persuasion and rhetoric. The thesis aimed to problematize this second pole initially, but then, it opted for the place that corresponds to it, that is, the *persuasive uomo*. What kind of work would a true philosopher have presented, according to the terms that Michelstaedter understands? It is not too worth asking ourselves about a work that was not, because there are plenty of possible readings, no matter how obsidian and opaque they may look.

### III

Something worth discussing is "why Michelstaedter?" Raised in the corpus integrated by *La persuasione e la rettorica*, the notes of *Appendici Critiche*, the schooling of the *Scritti Vari* and the notions that he hints at in *Dialogo della salute*, we can see very strong theses on the beginnings of a tumultuous and brief Century. Carlo did not see the war, did not live it, did not participate in it; his mother, sister and other relatives, yes, in their own flesh. Carlo knew nothing of fascism, except for the ideas of D'Annunzio, an author he surely read or heard of. Mussolini was a few years older than Carlo, in 1910 he had little political relevance, and he harbored more spirits of inmate and Nietzschean – obviously Dannunzian – than of *Duce*. That is, Carlo lived only the decadence of the nineteenth-century end. In short, except for personal dilemmas (Nadia B., his brother, the departure of a friend for Argentina), we can risk thinking that Carlo lived his life. Michelstaedter studied, thought, wrote tirelessly, struck up friendships and maintained loves, but he did not have the motivations of the later generation, or those who saw more days. We can find, however, profuse ideas that give rise to countenances such as that of Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Jaspers, Lukács. Our author foreshadows, as if he were a prophet, the most crucial problems of the first half of the Century:





the linguistic turn, scientific-moral relativism, the relationship of the subaltern, hermeneutics, phenomenology, finitude, fallen modes, being-in-the-world, being-for-death. Of course, he is not a visionary or a superior intellectual — nor would he want it that way — but rather a *philosopher*, a persuaded, a formal limit in the rhetorical structure, a break, a *between*. In many ways, Carlo was not a victim of his time, but a doctor who evaluates the symptoms, who operates over the determinations of logocentrism and the problems brought about by the *phoné* (of course, even before the birth of Jacques Derrida). But what woke up after his death?

There is a good article by Sergio Campailla (2018), "The first interpretations of Michelstaedter (1910-1916)", where he gives us an extremely clear line of reading. Carlo did not have an editorial purpose as such, he did not know how to be a precocious essayist, in the manner of Slataper, nor a young professor like Nietzsche, but those who collected his works for the post *suicidium* publication generated a certain stir around the figure of the young philosopher. Already the death by his own hand of a twenty-year-old in the Trieste generated rumors and fervent appropriations, and in his brief writing Campailla manages to account for how Papini, Cecchi and Borgese were the first to allege "metaphysical" causes. The young Papini had not even had access to the text of the Gorizian doctoral student, which was not edited until two years after the death of the latter, and it is possible that he made a translation based on the death of Otto Weininger. On the other hand, motivated by the novelty of the publication of the first volume of poetry by Michelstaedter, the Triestine Slataper and Benco do their part. In this case, suicide takes on a different aspect: work is everything, truth is everything. It is worthwhile, in his judgment, to commit suicide for *work*, for the effort of *truth*. More unusually, Michelstaedter's countrymen appeal again to the Papinian source, to the one who did not even read the work and also ventured a theory. But these weren't the only ones to speak. After Cecchi and Borgese —which we decided to omit because of the monotony of their hypotheses—, Amendola sees the passage from *theorein* to *aggire*, from saying (seen) to fact (hearing) as a sufficient reason (Campailla, 2018).

But that's not all, since it is enough to look a little back to our days to discover a revealing article in this regard: "On logical suicide" by Miguel Morey (2014). Here a return to the concepts of



"metaphysical" and "logical" as adjectives of the suicidal act is rehearsed. Inspired by Camus' challenge, Morey invites us to review a little the paths that Michelstaedter traveled in his last years of life, between 1908 and 1910, time of writing his infinite *Tesi di laurea*. He reminds us that his friend Enrico, the one who was in the genesis of his doctoral project, gave him the revolver that will end his days before leaving for Argentina, entering the sea, entering the desert. Morey emphasizes something concrete: Carlo, as we said, did not live the horrors of war, nor fascisms, nor communism, nor Auschwitz (Morey, 2014); he did not see the birth of the Reich and the familiarist catexis. But that's not what's important; the important thing is that he knew these selfish and petty phenomena, clearly rhetorical. Thus, his friend Enrico Mreule has to wander through a world that Carlo had glimpsed thanks to Parmenides, Plato, Schopenhauer and Buddha: the good disciple is the one who follows.

#### IV

Risking to draw a hypothesis is something crazy, petty, cowardly, rhetorical. However, it would also be necessary to miss the opportunity to add some final notes about the Michelstaedter case, and, mainly, the phenomenon of suicide. It must be clarified that this is not done by those who can no longer feel the gaze on themselves, but for us, who knowing that we are dead we can still look. To watch. Again, *theorein* who tries to dodge prejudice; while observing, he shows. A good word to describe this last act is "mystery", impossibility – biological and psychological – of establishing a reliable cause. When talking about suicide, we tend to address extreme moods, whether reductionist or emergentist, because there is no way to think about suicide in a simple way, other than as an epiphenomenon. That Michelstaedter committed suicide remains in the anecdote, since this does not produce any kind of file or memory. Let us try a clear and concise definition: suicidal is the one who cannot tell us his experience, the one of whom there is no trace or trace, the solitary acolyte. Life—with a capital "V"—may be what Michelstaedter pursued. Be that as it may, and to relate him to the thinker we made use of at the beginning of this small work, Gilles Deleuze, perhaps he did not take his own life. It is possible that neither the Frenchman nor the Gorizian thought of denial of Life when



they undertook the final act. Perhaps our introspection can tell us this: to try to know what happened, how it happened, why it happened is to recreate once again the rhetoric, the game of references that unites us (and enmities) us as a society. But the rhetorical machine always involves a certain violence, whether political, descriptive, evaluative or "philosophical". Remove the absolute from the middle, or not make one's own will a mere will-to, will-over-medium, will of absolute. At the beginning we talked about the concepts, those ontological ones that get tired, that are exhaustive, that we exhaust, and perhaps it does make sense to return to this endearing character, despite the temporal, local and physical distance, to live with him. Whether or not life deserves to be lived, great dilemma; however, and far from the Schopenhauerean *Quietiv* of music, let's say that for this time it does not matter. I write this in a context of pandemic, quarantine, uncertainty: there is no better time to link with the past and the future. Revisionism and opinions everywhere, come together and articulate our day to day, waiting, perhaps, for mythical resolutions. Myth upon myth, as is rhetoric, let us not be carried away by messianism and resort to the doubly utopian idea of Michelstaedter: we must renounce the noplacement, as well as the Aristotelian rhetoric of the *topoi*. I apologize for this fleeting and unapologetic inclusion, but we are, in short, a falling weight or a floating aerostat; that falls because it falls, that floats by-that floats. Never mind. What must be overcome in both cases is gravity.

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