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CARLO MICHELSTAEDTER: PERSUASION AND RHETORIC

by

MASSIMILIANO MOSCHETTA

Under the Direction of Louis A. Ruprecht, Jr.

ABSTRACT

Carlo Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (1910) is one of the best examples of what Massimo Cacciari calls the early twentieth century "metaphysics of youth." *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is the result of Michelstaedter's academic investigation on the concepts of "persuasion" and "rhetoric" in Plato and Aristotle. Michelstaedter saw in Plato's corpus the gradual abandonment of Parmenidean "being" and Socrates' dialogical philosophy. He reinterpreted the notions of "persuasion" and "rhetoric" as terms of a radical dichotomy, using them to represent two opposed ontological modalities, epistemological attitudes, and existential alternatives. If "rhetoric" comprehends language, institutional knowledge, and all manifestations of empirical life, then "persuasion" is defined as the unity of the individual with Parmenidean being. Persuasion is an impossible choice: "lifeless life." Being a decisive alternative to rhetoric, persuasion – much like Platonic *mania* – can neither be articulated nor communicated. Nevertheless, Michelstaedter speaks, aware of his inevitable failure: he will not persuade anyone.

INDEX WORDS: Michelstaedter, Cacciari, Lukács, Wittgenstein, Parmenides, Plato, Socrates, Persuasion, Rhetoric, Dialectic, Aporia.

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MASSIMILIANO MOSCHETTA

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Georgia State University

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2007

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INTRODUCTION

The present work is indebted to Massimo Cacciari's studies on Michelstaedter and some Middle-European[1] thinkers who were his contemporaries. Cacciari's essays – *La lotta 'su' Platone* (*The War 'on' Plato*), *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter* (*Interpretation of Michelstaedter*), and *Metafisica della Gioventù* (*Metaphysics of Youth*) – constitute the main inspiration for my investigations on Carlo Michelstaedter.

The object of my thesis is to describe, analyze, and contextualize Carlo Michelstaedter's 1910 work, *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (*La Persuasion e la Rettorica*), the result of Michelstaedter's academic investigation of Plato and Aristotle. In order to contextualize *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, I will relate it to other two philosophical works of roughly the same period: György Lukács' *Soul and Form* (1910); and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922). According to Massimo Cacciari, *Persuasion and Rhetoric* represents the acme of all Middle-European intellectual culture of the decade that anticipated World War I; Cacciari calls it "the generation of the 80's." Despite some undeniable differences in content, form, and methodology, many intellectuals working in this period share the same "enthusiasm (in its ontological meaning) of youth, genial loneliness … and sore disenchantment, abandonment and renunciation of the soberest and most lucid old age."[2] All these works privilege the archetype of the modern "metaphysics of youth"[3] which, according to Cacciari, is implicit in the "*Wille*" of Schopenhauer; they are also linked by a common ethos that denies any

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All translations from Italian are mine, with the exception of: Carlo Michelstaedter, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, trans. Russell Scott Valentino, Cinzia Sartini Blum, and David J. Depew, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

[1] See my discussion at page 8.

[2] Cacciari, *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter*, 21.

[3] "Metaphysics of Youth" is the title of an essay by Walter Benjamin (1913-14). Cacciari also used the title, "Metaphysics of Youth," for his foreword to György Lukács. *Diario (1910-1911)*.

moral and ontological compromise, or any mediating theory such as the Aristotelian *mesotes* formula. In these works, "irreducible choices" are presented. Cacciari believes that three books emerged in this period as representative of what he calls "extreme works" (*opere limite*): Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric*; Lukács' *Soul and Form*; and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. These authors, who all have Jewish origins, share the same rejection of "aesthetic culture." In Michelstaedter's and Lukács' terms, aesthetic culture is bound to relativism and impressionism, since the aesthetic type bases truth on his or her sensory impressions, and depends on them for making judgments of an ethical nature. We may say, along with Cacciari, that in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, *Soul and Form*, and *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the same *need for truth* appears, and the same necessity to individualize the appropriate *locus* for the truth to reveal itself: "a deep pathos for truth, and a sense of absolute responsibility for thinking and writing link, in this respect, Lukács, Michelstaedter, and Wittgenstein."[4]

Lukács and Michelstaedter locate the truth in some notion of "idea," and both *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and *Soul and Form* aim to "save" the Platonic "Idea" from its mundane corruption; nevertheless, their strategies move in two opposite directions. Lukács chooses the *Symposium* as his Platonic reference-point, and sees the essay's "form" as the place where the Platonic idea can reveal itself. According to Cacciari, Lukács understands the essay as an *ethical*[5] form of non-systematic modern dialectic: the essay possesses the idea by showing its distance from it; the essay fosters the truth insofar as it shows it, but does not contain it. This constitutes the essay's

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[4] Cacciari, *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter*, 23.

[5] "Form is the highest judge of life. Form-giving is a judging force, an *ethic*; there is a value-judgment in everything that has been given form. Every kind of form-giving, every literary form, is a step in the hierarchy of life-possibilities: the all-decisive word has been spoken about a man and his fate when the decision is taken as to the form which his life-manifestations can assume and which the highest moments of his life demand." Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 173, emphasis mine.

dialectical power: the essay comprehends the idea, and at the same time it does not; it comprehends it providing a sign, but it does not insofar as it cannot encompass it. By contrast, Michelstaedter chooses the *Apology* and *Gorgias* as his constructive Platonic sources, and, even if he tells us that the Idea – and the truth – can only emerge through Socratic negative dialectic, his work seems to suggest that "reaching the truth" – what he calls "persuasion" – is a form of *divination*, much like what Plato calls *mania*.[6] Michelstaedter's philosophy is essentially opposed to any "discursive" form: the truth needs to be possessed, and possessing the truth is precisely being persuaded; but truth and persuasion can neither be articulated nor communicated. In this respect Michelstaedter would not agree with Lukács' position, since the "essay" is "continuous interpretation," and thus it can never *possess* the Idea and the truth. *Persuasion and Rhetoric* thus presents us with a thought that is aporetic: *persuasion* is beyond the rhetoric of language, and cannot be communicated. Nevertheless, Michelstaedter endeavors to speak of it, and in this way persuasion becomes rhetoric. As we will see, in many passages of *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, Michelstaedter says that "persuasion" is "solitude" and "silence," and yet he tries to articulate "persuasion" through his rhetoric.

This proposed distance between language and life, as well as the image of "silence," are what link Michelstaedter to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Proposition no. 7 of the *Tractatus* says: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence"[7]; Wittgenstein claims that it is impossible to express meaning outside the boundaries of propositional language, yet the fundamental human problems cannot be solved within the limits of language. Michelstaedter shares this opinion, and yet he tries to escape from rhetoric. "To the ascetic

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[6] See *Phaedrus* 244a-245c. As I will discuss later, Michelstaedter sees in the *Phaedrus* the first signs of Plato's abandonment of Socratic philosophy. Nonetheless, this dialogue influenced Michelstaedter positively. Moreover, the *Phaedrus* belongs to the same period as the *Symposium*, which is Lukács' Platonic reference-point.

[7] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 89.

honesty of Wittgenstein is opposed the tragic dishonesty of Michelstaedter."[8] Even if the *Tractatus* leaves the reader with silence, and *Persuasion and Rhetoric* with an impossible saying, Cacciari believes that in Wittgenstein's silence we can hear an aspiration similar to the "desperate attempt to say" in Michelstaedter's work.

Since Michelstaedter is in constant dialogue with Plato, contextualizing *Persuasion and Rhetoric* also involves relating it to certain important Platonic texts. For this reason, I will relate *Persuasion and Rhetoric* to the philosophy of Plato – or rather, Michelstaedter's interpretation of Plato – and, in the Conclusion, I will offer a brief comparison between *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and the *Gorgias*, which represents, along with the *Apology*, a fundamental influence on Michelstaedter's views. In my work, I do not want to offer a one-way reading of Michelstaedter's philosophy; by this I mean that I do not want to interpret *Persuasion and Rhetoric* as a mere product of a pre-World War I *Zeitgeist*, or to present it as a completely revolutionary work. I believe that among Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, Lukács' *Soul and Form*, and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, there are "family resemblances."[9] For example, it is indubitable that in *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and *Soul and Form* something is "decided" in relation to Platonic philosophy, and that in both Michelstaedter's and Wittgenstein's frameworks "truth" and "saying" are related. In relation to Plato, we can say that *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and the *Gorgias* fight the same battle against Sophistry, but also that in his work Michelstaedter commits a Platonic "parricide." In this respect, in relation to Platonic philosophy and Middle-European intellectual culture, *Persuasion*

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[8] Cacciari, *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter*, 30.

[9] The notion of "family resemblance" derives from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In this context, I reinterpret this Wittgensteinean notion, in order to show that the works I mentioned are related by similarities, but cannot be reduced to a common ultimate "essence."

and Rhetoric stands as an original work. As Lukács says, "[l]et any resemblance serve here merely as a background against which the differences stand out more sharply."[10]

It is important to notice that reconstructing Michelstaedter's thought entails several hermeneutical problems. *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is an extremely complicated text; in the introduction to the English edition we read:

> [T]he most remarkable feature of Michelstaedter's style is its complexity.… Michelstaedter's writing is expressionistically "dissonant." True to the content of his work, Michelstaedter disavows any intention of "persuading" or "diverting" his readers, as well as any claim to originality, "philosophical dignity," or "artistic concreteness." An ironic interpretation of such a paradoxical statement of (lack of) purpose is possible: we can read it as a rhetorical strategy (*acutum dicendi genus*) intended to produce an effect of estrangement, which makes the reader step outside established patterns of thought (the *vie*, 'ways' or 'paths,' of which Michelstaedter writes at numerous points.) This defamiliarizing effect, which can plausibly be ascribed to Heraclitus or Parmenides as no less intentional, is instrumental to the goal of persuasion as Michelstaedter conceives it. The quest for persuasion requires, as also for the Greek authors he prefers, a break with the normal world, the world Parmenides calls "the way of seeming."…
>
> In view of the authors' attachment to poetic and paradoxical thinkers, as well as his refusal in writing his dissertation to obey the conventions of academic prose, … it is not surprising that his style would pose great difficulties for readers. Campailla notes that from an editor's standpoint Michelstaedter's punctuation is a "veritable *via crucis*." (PR, xxiv-xxv, notes omitted)

Moreover, *Persuasion and Rhetoric* often presents theses that seem to be in contradiction with one another. My intention is to lead the reader through Michelstaedter's argument, try to explain some of its contradictions, all the while being aware that this will not always be possible. On the one hand, Michelstaedter defines persuasion and rhetoric as antithetical concepts, in terms of a radical dichotomy; on the other hand, he points to the possibility of persuasion in the world, which, in his terms, is rhetorically constituted.

My thesis will develop through the following stages: I will first introduce Carlo Michelstaedter as an historical and intellectual figure, and then I will analyze his main work, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*; this latter task will constitute the main part of my thesis. The first chapter will be divided in two sections: "On Persuasion," and "On Rhetoric." In the second

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[10] Lukács, *Soul and Form*, 2.

chapter, I will discuss *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s relationship to the philosophy of Socrates and Plato, who are extremely important influences on Michelstaedter's views. In the third and final chapter, I will relate Michelstaedter's work to György Lukács' *Soul and Form*, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; this abbreviated final chapter will help to elucidate the similarities between Michelstaedter and some of his contemporaries, as well as what constitutes the distinctive qualities of his thought. In the Conclusion, "Dialectic, Aporia, and Parmenidean Being," I will return to the aporetic level of Michelstaedter's discourse, and its problematic relation to Parmenidean thought.

CHAPTER ONE: CARLO MICHELSTAEDTER: *PERSUASION AND RHETORIC*

I certainly have composed no work in regard to it, nor shall I ever do so in the future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies. Acquaintance with it must come rather after a long period of attendance on instruction in the subject itself or a close companionship, when suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining.

Besides, this at any rate I know, that if there were to be a treatise or a lecture on this subject, I could do it best. I am also sure for that matter that I should be very sorry to see such a treatise poorly written. If I thought it possible to deal adequately with the subject in a treatise or a lecture for the general public, what finer achievement would there have been in my life than to write a work of great benefit to mankind and to bring the nature of things to light for all men? I do not, however, think the attempt to tell mankind of these matters a good thing, except in the case of some few who are capable of discovering the truth for themselves with a little guidance.

-Plato, *Seventh Letter* 341 c-e.

I know I am talking because I'm talking, but I also know I shall not persuade anyone, and this is dishonesty; but rhetoric αναγκάζει με ταυτα δραν βία*, 'forcibly compels me to do things'; in other words, "if you bite into a crabapple, you've got to spit it out."*

-Carlo Michelstaedter, *PR,* 4.

The youngest of four children, Carlo Michelstaedter was born into a Jewish family in Gorizia (now part of Italy) on June 3, 1887. He died by his own hand on October 17, 1910, at age 23.[11] Gorizia, located in the north-east of Italy – the region is now called Friuli Venezia Giulia – was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. I will first discuss Michelstaedter's intellectual formation, and then turn to an explication of his most influential text.

Michelstaedter's body of literary works (*Persuasion and Rhetoric*, *The Dialogue of Health*, *Poems*, and *Epistolario*)[12] is dominated by a relentless attack on institutional knowledge

[11] The possible reasons for Michelstaedter's suicide have been discussed in several essays and books. Some authors consider his suicide as *metaphysically* consistent with his thought. Some others deny this possibility. In my thesis I do not intend to discuss this issue, since it has often prevented Michelstaedter from being considered only for his philosophy.

[12] *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is considered Michelstaedter's main philosophical work. Nevertheless his corpus consists of several poems, writings, letters, drawings and paintings. The collection of his original works is held at the Carlo Michelstaedter Foundation – Fondo Carlo Michelstaedter – in Gorizia, Italy. Besides *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, Adelphi Editions has published: *Poesie* (1987), a collection of poems; *Il Dialogo della Salute e Altri Dialoghi*, (1988), a collection of fictional dialogues in a Platonic-Leopardian vein; and *Epistolario* (1983), a selection among Michelstaedter's personal correspondence.

and systematic thought, for example, the philosophy of Hegel. Michelstaedter interpreted Plato's corpus as divided in two parts: "young" works and "old" dialogues, respectively.[13] He considered the philosophy of the "old" Plato also as systematic, and he criticized him precisely for this change. These intellectual attitudes made Michelstaedter an "untimely" Italian figure, for in the Italy of late 1800's /early 1900's the dominant philosophical position was neo-idealism, especially that of Benedetto Croce. Idealism's dominance and popularity also prevented Michelstaedter from being considered as a philosopher by many of his contemporaries; in 1922 Giovanni Gentile reviewed *Persuasion and Rhetoric* in the journal *La Critica*, and he criticized Michelstaedter precisely for his lack of systematicity. For this reason Michelstaedter needs to be considered in relation to Middle-European intellectual culture, and not just in relation to Italian philosophy and letters. "Middle-European intellectual culture" is a very broad, and perhaps overly general, term; I am here referring to intellectual movements and tendencies of central European culture in the early twentieth century. In this period, intellectuals from a variety of disciplines were investigating similar problems with similar attitudes. I consider Vienna to be the inner capital of Middle-Europe, as I present it here; I would also include in what I am calling "Middle-European Culture" figures such as Sigmund Freud, Arthur Schnitzler, Robert Musil,

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[13] It is important to notice that Michelstaedter does not offer an analytic reconstruction of the Platonic dialogues' chronology. He recognizes examples of what he calls "persuasion" in the *Apology* and the *Gorgias*. Michelstaedter's understanding of the chronology of Plato's corpus emerges in his Critical Appendices, which follow *Persuasion and Rhetoric* in an Italian edition published by Adelphi. I will refer to them with the abbreviation AC, followed by the page number. Michelstaedter cites the *Crito*, the *Protagoras*, and the *Symposium* as both "serious" and "playful" works; "when Plato was serious, then he played" (AC, 194). The *Phaedrus* may be considered, in Michelstaedter's view, as a *transitional* dialogue: this work, which is still playful, shows that Plato abandoned Socratic teachings: he considered his own method, and offered an apology for it. In this way, Plato opted for a "rhetorical" philosophy. According to Michelstaedter, the *Republic* represents the first dialogue in which Plato attempts to organize society in "rhetorical" terms. Here, the society that Plato depicts is founded on the irrational logic of needs. Michelstaedter says that in the *Republic* Plato identified "the principle of lack as the substantial principle" and "the irrationality of our necessity as the principle of reason" (AC, 146). This "rhetorical" thought reached its most highly developed articulation in what Michelstaedter sees as "dialectic-systematic" dialogues, such as the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist*. Michelstaedter recognizes in these two dialogues the "decadence" of Platonic philosophy. In the *Parmenides* and the *Sophist* "*to on* (being)" dies, and, through the introduction of "*to heteron* (the different)," philosophical honesty disappears forever (AC, 181).

and George Trakl. Michelstaedter's thought also develops and takes shape alongside the work of intellectuals such as György Lukács, Georg Simmel, Otto Weinenger, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. To support this idea, Thomas J. Harrison sees Michelstaedter as an exponent of European Expressionism,[14] and, as we have already seen, Massimo Cacciari considers *Persuasion and Rhetoric* to be a book that shares the same ethos as Lukács' and Wittgenstein's early works.

Persuasion and Rhetoric is an investigation based upon a fundamental dichotomy: "persuasion" versus "rhetoric." This dichotomy is understood by Michelstaedter in ontological terms, and since his ontology is based on Parmenides' conception of "being," the dichotomy may also be read as: "being" versus "not-being," or "being" versus "lack-of-being." Parmenidean "being" is, has been, and always will be, one and unchangeable. By contrast, this world – which appears, and thus exists – is constituted by a multitude of determinations and by constant movement and becoming. Therefore, this world differs from Parmenidean being, and in differing from it, it lacks such being. But how can any worldly determination *be* if it lacks being? I would say that any determination is (exists) to the extent that its existence is contradictory. This constitutes the primary ontological aporia that will present itself throughout *Persuasion and Rhetoric*: every living thing exists, and yet it is separated from being, and thus it lacks being. We may say that the world of determinations is the result of a misunderstanding of Parmenides' being: it is Heraclitus's realm of permanent becoming.[15] If the dichotomy "persuasion" versus "rhetoric" was introduced in Parmenidean terms as "being" versus "lack-of-being," then this idea may be re-formulated as "Parmenidean being" versus "Heraclitean becoming." As Daniela Bini

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[14] This is one of the main theses of Harrison's *1910*.

[15] "Because at no point is the will satisfied, each thing destroys itself in coming into being and in passing away: πάντα ρει, 'everything flows'" (PR, 15, note omitted).

says, "Michelstaedter was a 'Parmenidean' insofar as he was 'Heraclitean'; that is, he needed to believe in an immutable being because he was trapped in the world of becoming."[16]

Persuasion realizes the Parmenidean identity of being and thought. When men live rhetorically, they are separated from Parmenidean being, insofar they relate themselves to the determinations and make use of the "availability" of beings.[17] On the other hand, persuasion means *to be one with the totality*, *to be the totality*. It is in relation to this point that Michelstaedter shows an enormous distance from Plato's dialectic: it seems that *any type of dialectical synthesis is not possible in his framework*.

Michelstaedter's conception of "persuasion" and "rhetoric" derives from a peculiar understanding of Plato's thought, and more particularly the Socratic philosophy described by Plato. In my previous thesis[18] I focused precisely on this ambiguous relation between Michelstaedter and Plato. Indeed, I claim the relation to be ambiguous due to the fact that Plato is Michelstaedter's main polemical target in the passages of *Persuasion and Rhetoric* that are dedicated to the critique of Rhetoric as "knowledge." Nevertheless, Michelstaedter's constructive thought is still influenced by Platonic philosophy. We might even claim that Michelstaedter is presenting a Platonic critique of Platonism. On the one hand, Michelstaedter's ontology and his conception of human modality of existence, which has persuasion and rhetoric as its extremes, are based on Parmenides' thought; on the other hand, they develop alongside the philosophical works of Plato. Besides Parmenides, for the reasons I have discussed, Plato is the author with

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[16] Bini, *Carlo Michelstaedter and the Failure of Language*, 22. Bini says that Michelstaedter *needed* to believe in an immutable being, because, in my opinion, Michelstaedter could not accept the logical contradiction of becoming in the world.

[17] "It is the knowledge of the thing's perpetual flow what teaches us to make use of things in the moment that does not come back." Michelstaedter, *Il Dialogo della Salute*, 48.

[18] Massimiliano Moschetta, *Carlo Michelstaedter Lettore di Platone: la Persuasione e la Rettorica*.

whom Michelstaedter – explicitly or implicitly – is in constant dialogue, and Platonic thought is always lying behind *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s pages.

"The concepts of Persuasion and Rhetoric in Plato and Aristotle" is the subject of Michelstaedter's university dissertation (*tesi di laurea*) at the Istituto di Studi Superiori in Florence, Italy. His thesis director was Girolamo Vitelli, professor of ancient Greek literature, and "heir to the most technical philological tradition then in fashion in Germany"[19] The original thesis project would later serve as mere appendices to *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, and it is in them that we find the genealogy of the concept of "rhetoric," understood by Michelstaedter as (decadent) philosophical knowledge. In *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, the traditional Greek concept is subject to a transformation; its meaning becomes so wide that it comprehends the totality of human behavior, the essence of language, and the foundations of any philosophical system.[20]

Michelstaedter's attention to the distinction between "rhetoric" and "persuasion" began early in his academic career, and it developed out of his broader philological interests. In this regard we should note a telling comment from a letter to his father (dated May 31, 1908), where Michelstaedter describes a philology exercise based upon Cicero's oration *Pro Q. Ligario*: "These are not my kind of works…. The only things that got my attention are the observations I could make on eloquence and 'persuasion' in general."[21] Michelstaedter decided to focus on the concepts of "persuasion" and "rhetoric" for many different reasons. As the scholar Gianfranco Gianotti says, Michelstaedter was interested in the dichotomy of persuasion/rhetoric because, under the influence of Parmenides, he started to interpret it as an expression of the irreducible

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[19] Gianotti, *Carlo Michelstaedter tra "Persuasione" e "Rettorica,"* 172.

[20] "Rhetoric" replaces "persuasion" when "[t]he criterion is no longer the ειναι (being), rather the αποδεικνύναι (demonstration) and the 'αποφάναι (declaration)" (AC, 176). Michelstaedter claims that with rhetoric we have lost being, since we "συμπλέκωμεν (link) and κατηγορωμεν (demonstrate)" instead (AC, 178). Philosophical argumentation, logical syllogism, demonstration are all expressions of rhetoric, because in "*saying is already implicit movement*" (AC, 178).

[21] Michelstaedter, *Epistolario*, 321.

antithesis of appearance and reality. Following in the Platonic as well as the Romantic-Decadent tradition, he understood "rhetoric" as a web of discourses indifferent to the "truth"; he consequently promoted the concept of "persuasion" to a higher onto-epistemological level. Far from being a mere function of rhetoric (as it was understood to be in the Classical tradition), persuasion was elevated to the "certainty of being" prior to any falsifying linguistic architecture.[22] Since Michelstaedter's ontology is based on the Parmenidean unity of being and thought, and thus on the unity of ontology and epistemology, he interpreted the dichotomy "persuasion" versus "rhetoric" first as an ontological split ("being" versus "appearance"), and then as an epistemological dualism ("certainty of being" versus "opinion"). Thus, in Michelstaedter's work, persuasion and rhetoric are detached from their original Classical (philological and linguistic) environment, and used to represent *two opposed ontological modalities, two epistemological attitudes, and two existential alternatives*.

At this point, it is clear that the original analysis of the concepts of "persuasion" and "rhetoric" in Plato and Aristotle was the *pretext* that would lead Michelstaedter eventually to write *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. I say "Pretext" because 1) it represents the *occasion* for the author to express his radical *Weltanschauung*, and 2) it anticipates the critical appendices, which ironically constituted the original dissertation project.[23]

Persuasion and Rhetoric is structured in two parts: *On Persuasion* (*Della Persuasione*), and *On Rhetoric* (*Della Rettorica*). Each part consists of three chapters:

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[22] See Gianotti, *Carlo Michelstaedter tra "Persuasione" e "Rettorica,"* 177.

[23] The *Critical Appendices* are as follows:

1. *I modi della significazione*; "On the modes of signification."
2. *Note alla triste istoria che viene narrate a pag 66 e sgg*; "Notes on the sad story narrated at page 66ff."
3. *Proiezione della mente di Aristotele sui modi della significazione*; "Projection of Aristotle's mind onto the modes of signification."
4. *Della composizione della* Rettorica *di Aristotele*; "On the composition of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*."
5. *La* Rettorica di Aristotele *e il* Fedro *di Platone*; "Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and Plato's *Phaedrus*."
6. *Della dialettica e della rettorica*. "On Dialectics and Rhetoric."

1. Part I: On Persuasion.
    - Persuasion
    - The Illusion of Persuasion
    - The Way to Persuasion
2. Part II: On Rhetoric.
    - Rhetoric
    - The Constitution of Rhetoric
    - Rhetoric in Life

I would now like to offer a brief recapitulation of Michelstaedter's radical proposal. It is interesting to note that the description of persuasion is the content of the first part, while the analysis (theoretical and phenomenological) of rhetoric constitutes the second. *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s structural outline shows us how, for Michelstaedter, being in itself is ontologically prior to its worldly manifestations, and certainty of being is prior to "mortals' opinions." Persuasion is thus onto-logically[24] prior to rhetoric.

In the preface to *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, Michelstaedter claims that he does not pretend to say anything new; his words have already been said many times – by Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Socrates, Ecclesiastes, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Simonides, Petrarch, Leopardi, Ibsen, and Beethoven:

> Yet insofar as everything I am saying has been said many times before and with great force, it seems impossible that the world has continued each time such words have rung out.
>
> Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Empedocles told it to the Greeks, but Aristotle treated them as untutored naturalists; Socrates said it, but they constructed four systems on him. Ecclesiastes said it, but they dealt with it as a sacred book that could not therefore contradict biblical optimism; Christ said it, but they built the church upon it. Aeschylus and Sophocles and Simonides said it, and Petrarch proclaimed it triumphantly to the Italians, while Leopardi repeated it with pain. But

[24] I used the term "*onto-logical*," with "onto" and "logical" linked by the hyphen, in order to represent graphically the link between *being* and *logos*. For Michelstaedter, as a follower of Parmenides, logos and being are one: "because the same thing is there for thinking and for being." *Parmenides of Elea*, 57.

> men were pleased by their pretty verses and made of them literary types. If in our time the creatures of Ibsen bring it to life in every scene, men "amuse themselves" by hearing those "exceptional" stories among all the others, and the critics speak of "symbolism"; and if Beethoven sings it so as to move the heart, then everyone turns such emotion to his own ends, making it, in the end, a question of counterpoint. (PR, 4, notes omitted)

These thinkers are what we might consider Michelstaedter's explicit influences; besides these, who are explicitly mentioned, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s main implicit reference is Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* (1818, Second Ed. 1844). We can say that this is the clearest and most evident of his uncited influences. But I do not want to interpret Michelstaedter's work as a mere transposition of Schopenhauer's *Wille* into an existential framework. Both La Rocca and Cacciari are clear about the mistake that such an interpretation would entail. In Michelstaedter's framework, the will cannot be the *noumenon* of the world. Life is indeed contradictory, but not because the will is that to which all manifestations in reality can ultimately be reduced. Rather, *the will is in itself essentially contradictory*: life, in the rhetorical world, constantly propagates through time and can never arrive upon itself. Persuaded life, on the other hand, is *self-sufficiency and consistency*; this is the reason why Michelstaedter defines the latter as *abios bios*: "lifeless life."[25] Unlike Schopenhauer, Michelstaedter does not see the will as the inner motor of the world nor as the ultimate drive for all living forms. Instead, he interprets the will as *lack*. So will's character is essentially relational: everything is *un esser-per*, *a being-for*. In Schopenhauer, the will is prior to the intellect; for Michelstaedter, by contrast, will and consciousness are the same: "*Determinacy is an attribution of value: consciousness*" (PR, 15). Michelstaedter reads Schopenhauer's descriptions of the world also in terms of justice and injustice. He claims: "*Alle haben recht – niemand ist gerecht*: 'Everyone is right – no one *has the right*'" (PR, 46). Any fact, any happening in the world, takes place with a reason, a right,

[25] "In the ἄβιος βίος, 'lifeless life,' potency and act are one and the same, for… *persuasion* [ ] denies time and the will in every deficient moment" (PR, 16).

which is Schopenhauer's logic of needs and will that he interprets through the relation of cause-and-effect. Everything that happens, happens for a reason (the cause-and-effect dynamic), but not with justice.[26] According to Michelstaedter, there is no possibility of justice in the rhetorical world, since justice is relative to each particular individual, and therefore "just" always means "just for someone." Michelstaedter's critique attacks the ontological basis of the "social" world, and in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, priority is given to individuals, since any social institution is by definition an expression of rhetoric, not persuasion. Michelstaedter believes that in the rhetorical world any individual's affirmation is irrational and violent, and thus it necessarily collides with other individuals' affirmations. The "just man" *has* justice; he lives outside time's flow and outside what in the Appendices Michelstaedter calls "*kolakeia*," that rhetorical "gathering together" of pernicious people.

On Persuasion

In the first pages of his work, Michelstaedter defines the persuaded person as the one who *is for himself* and does not need anything else in order to be: "He who is for himself (μένει) has no need of what would be for him (μένοι αυτόν) in a future time but instead possesses[27] all within himself" (PR, 10). Michelstaedter identifies "Being" with "substantiality." Classical metaphysics understands substance to be "what stands for itself," and "what does not need anything else in order to be". Since all the entities in the world are essentially relational, they are also non-substantial; lacking substance, they also lack being. According to Michelstaedter, then, all the entities that humans interpret as substances, are only momentary abstractions from the

[26] I think that even in relation to this argument, Michelstaedter is influenced by Parmenides in particular and by pre-Socratic thought in general. It is interesting to read a parallel Anaximander fragment: "The Unlimited is the first-principle of things that are. It is that from which the coming-to-be [of things and qualities] takes place, and it is that into which they return when they perish, by moral necessity, giving satisfaction to one another and making reparation for their injustice, according to the order of time." – *Presocratics*, 54.
[27] I will return to the importance of "possession" in Michelstaedter's philosophy in the last chapter.

constant flux of becoming. In the passage we just quoted, Michelstaedter introduces the figure of the persuaded individual precisely as the *substance*, which is free from time and accidents.

The persuaded person does not need the rhetorical connections that delude men to be sufficient, because he or she possesses all within him- or herself. To be persuaded entails the negation of one's relation to determinations: "Persuaded is *he who has life within himself*, a soul naked amongst the islands of the blessed" (PR, 11).[28] According to Michelstaedter, as a close reader of Schopenhauer, time brings contradiction into life: everything pretends to be life, while in fact it is not. "*Each thing that lives persuades itself that this continuous deficiency, by which every living thing dies in continuing each instant, is life*" (PR, 14). Time's flow obliges men to see the present only in view of the future; doing so, it prevents them from the possibility of authentic persuasion and timeless being, and it relegates them to the realm of rhetorical becoming.

> In order to possess itself, to reach actual being, it [life] flows in time: and *time* is infinite, for were it to succeed in possessing itself, in consisting, it would cease to be will for life;… likewise *space* is infinite, for there is nothing that is not will for life…. *Life would be* if time did not constantly distance its being into the next instant. Life would be *one*, *immobile*, *formless* if it could consist in *one* point. The necessity of flight in time implies the necessity of the dilatation of space: *perpetual mutation*, from which comes *the infinite variety of things*… (PR, 14-15)

As this passage explains, time and space are the *conditio sine qua non* for the world to be, and movement and becoming are constituent elements of life. At the same time, time, space, and movement are also what prevent life from reaching itself: this is the ontological contradiction inherent in the rhetorical world. Life, by definition, wants itself, and it develops in time chasing its own fulfillment. But Michelstaedter argues that, if life could reach and possess itself – if it could consist in a single moment – then this would paradoxically be its negation; it would be

[28] The "naked soul" is a famous Platonic figure that appears at *Gorgias* 523a-524a. The parallel between the *Gorgias* and *Persuasion and Rhetoric* – the theme that constituted the core of my previous work – will be discussed in the Conclusion.

death. This argument exemplifies how contradiction is the essence of the rhetorical world. On the one hand, every living thing lacks itself, and chases its own fulfillment; on the other hand, if any thing could fulfill its drive, then its fulfillment would also entail its annihilation. If we understand persuasion as the *telos* of rhetoric – as the classical tradition conceives it – then persuasion is impossible. Rhetoric cannot have persuasion as its end, because persuasion is not sustainable for rhetorical beings, at both the organic and inorganic level.

> I know I want and do not have what I want. A weight hangs suspended from a hook; being suspended, it suffers because it cannot fall: it cannot get off the hook, for insofar as it is weight it suspends, and as long as it suspends it depends.
>
> We want to satisfy it: we free it from its dependence, letting it go so that it might satisfy its hunger for what lies below, and it falls independently for as long as it is content to fall. But at none of the points attained is it content to stop; it still wants to fall, for the next point below continually overtakes in lowness that which the weight has just attained. Nor will any future point be such as to render it content, being necessary to the weight's life insofar, όφρα μένη αυτόν, as it awaits below; but every time a point is made present, it will be emptied of all attraction, no longer being below; thus does it *want at every point the points below it*, and those attract it more and more. It is always drawn by an equal hunger for what is lower, and the will to fall remains infinite with it always.
>
> If at some point its will were finished and it could *possess* in one point the infinite descent of the infinite future, at that point it would no longer be what it is – *a weight*.
>
> Its life is this want of life. If it no longer wanted but were finished, perfect, if it possessed its own self, it would have ended its existence. At that point, as its own impediment to possessing life, the weight would not depend on what is external as much as on its own self, in that it is not given the means to be satisfied. The weight can never be persuaded. (PR, 8-9, note omitted)

Persuasion is defined in contraposition to the rhetorical contradiction of life; we have already seen that Michelstaedter calls it *abios bios*, "lifeless life," implying the paradox of a life that does not seek its fulfillment because it is already fulfilled.

We saw that life wants itself, and the will, as in Schopenhauer, aims to propagate itself; Michelstaedter develops this conception through his notion of *philopsychia*: "the love of one's own existence." The God of self-love (*philopsychia*) – the god of rhetoric *par excellence* – flatters men and prevents them from being persuaded. He deludes individuals, depriving them of the present and flattering them with illusory future goals. According to Michelstaedter there are two kinds of persuasion: 1) *real persuasion*, which is constituted in antithesis to rhetoric; and 2)

inadequate (or *illusory*) *persuasion*, which is one of the expressions of rhetorical dialectic. When humans – because of *weakness*[29] – submit to the flattery of the God of *philopsychia*, then they become trapped in the exitless circle of inadequate persuasion and illusory individuality. Inadequate persuasion is no more than "*the will of himself in the future*" (PR, 24). On the one hand, real persuasion negates time, will, and relational subjectivity (what Michelstaedter calls *persona*[30]); on the other hand, time, will, and persona – relational subjectivity and illusory individuality – are constituent elements of inadequate persuasion.

Inadequate persuasion – illusory individuality – takes shape through the following stages, which, together, constitute the vicious circle[31] of rhetorical living:

1. Something is – Μένει τι
2. Something is for me – Μένει μέ τι
3. There is hope for me – Πάρεστι ελπίς
4. I am sufficient – Αρκω.[32]

These four stages represent the dynamic through which human beings infer their substantiality. In the first stage (1), we have the recognition of a certain object, which exists independent of the subject. In the second (2), the subject identifies the object as what will fulfill its particular desire. Through the determinate fulfillment (3), humans infer that their desires will always be fulfilled in the future, and thus (4), they also infer their own self-sufficiency. We can say that humans first abstract relational data from the cycle of perpetual becoming, and then believe that the results of their abstractions are objects in themselves. Through this process, subject and object are created.

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[29] "*Thus in life do the weak adapt*" (PR, 34).
[30] "Michelstaedter's use of the Italian *persona* hovers between the modern sense of 'person' and the ancient designation of 'speaking role'" (PR, xxvi). We may read Michelstaedter's *persona* as both relational and illusory subjectivity.
[31] These four stages are graphically represented in a circle at *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, 23.
[32] "This is the exitless circle of illusory individuality, which affirms a *persona*, an end, a reason: *inadequate persuasion*" (PR, 23).

Objects appear to humans as "available," and in this way, they are interpreted as what can fulfill human desires. What was previously abstracted is now re-situated in the relation of "needs." This entails that people see themselves as capable of desiring in the future (as they are in the present); they also need to imagine their desires fulfilled in the future (as they also are in the present); from these two assumptions, humans infer their self-sufficiency. This kind of persuasion is *logically* inadequate, because it takes place in accordance with the rhetorical world, which contradicts the incontrovertible onto-logical truth of Parmenidean being. Nevertheless, *inadequate* persuasion is adequate to the world that it affirms; it "is adequate only to the world it creates for itself" (PR, 23). *In the rhetorical world only illusory individuality is possible.*

At this point in his analysis, Michelstaedter introduces the rhetorical dialectic of *pleasure* and *pain*. We said that *philopsychia*, which seduces, flatters, and deludes human beings, is a fundamental aspect of rhetoric. There is another important element in the rhetorical world, which works in the opposite direction: the *fear of death*. If human beings who are "illusorily persuaded" want themselves to continue as willing agents in the future, then they are also afraid that their will might cease in the future. They fear their own annihilation. Since human beings infer their sufficiency from the fulfillment of their particular desires, humans also see the end of will as their own end. We may interpret Michelstaedter's understanding of the dialectic of pleasure and pain and "*philopsychia*" versus the "fear-of-death" in the following way:

1. *Philopsychia* affirms: *you are*.
2. Fear of death affirms: *you are not*.[33]

If we analyze the dynamic in these terms, we can see that *philopsychia* flatters human beings by affirming that "you are"; this needs to be considered in relation to the fourth stage of illusory

[33] "And once the voice of pleasure, which tells it *you are*, is interrupted, it senses only the dull, painful murmur, now made distinct, which says: *you are not*; and all the while it asks for life" (PR, 32).

persuasion's circle, which also expresses human adulation, by claiming "you are sufficient." On the other hand, "fear of death" is "fear of being nothing," thus it is the "fear of not being"; humans fear their annihilation, which, inexorably, the flow of time entails.

> *Pain* of loss, of a determinate injury, which men believe limited to this alone, is rather terror at the revelation of the impotency of one's own illusion; it is a certain accident or malady, a death, ruin, catastrophe of given, familiar things: but it is mystery that opens the door to the tranquil, bright room warmed sufficiently for determinate hope, and it sneers: "Now I'm coming, and here you thought you were safe, and you are nothing." (PR, 31)

This passage elucidates the dialectic of pain and pleasure that we are examining. It is interesting to notice how the dichotomy can also be expressed in terms of "illusion" versus "certainty," and "potency" versus "impotence." The dialectic marks an ontological and existential dynamic: humans are struggling between their sufficiency and insufficiency, between reaching and losing themselves, between being and nothing. Thus the *fear of death* is a fundamental element in Michelstaedter's description of Persuasion and Rhetoric's contraposition.[34] Its genealogy may be traced back to Plato's *Apology*, which – along with the *Gorgias* – is an extremely important influence on Michelstaedter's views. In the *Apology* we read: "to be afraid of death is only another form of thinking that one is wise when one is not."[35] If fear of death defines rhetorical living, then persuasion is explained in antithesis to such a feeling. In order to be persuaded it is necessary not to fear death: "*He who fears death is already dead*" (PR, 39).

According to Michelstaedter, the one who is persuaded must be alone in the desert and must create everything around him. The figure of *the desert* is often present in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, and it exemplifies the necessary solitude that characterizes persuaded individuals. The desert calls to mind certain ascetic and hermetic traditions, as well as biblical imagery. In this

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[34] "Being *born* is nothing but wanting to go on: men live in order to live, in order *not to die*. Their persuasion is *the fear of death*. Being born is nothing but *fearing death*, so that, if death becomes certain in a certain future, *they are already dead in the present*" (PR, 39).
[35] *Apology* 29a; compare this to *Gorgias* 522e.

respect, we should remember that Christ is one of the examples of persuaded people present in Michelstaedter's work: "Christ said it, but they built the church upon it" (PR, 4). The biblical character of the desert metaphor is thus clear: Christ, in the desert, did not surrender to the temptations of the devil, and, in this way, he showed himself insusceptible to the flattery of mundane (rhetorical) adulation and the self-love of *philopsychia*'s god. Michelstaedter would say that Christ renounced rhetoric, and thus showed himself to be persuaded, and to be one with himself. This is an important passage in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, because it indicates that, for Michelstaedter, the Church expresses the "rhetorization" of Christ's teaching, much as Plato's system represents the "rhetorization" of Socrates' way and life.[36] The following is one of *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s most definitive statements: *persuasion can neither be constituted in a system of knowledge nor housed in historical institutions*.

At this point in his analysis, Michelstaedter says that the persuaded person withstands the burden of his pain differently from rhetorical individuals, whose pain and fear lead them to illusory persuasion via the perpetuation of their desires. The truly persuaded person creates him- or herself in order to possess the individual value and live beyond particular determinations. This particular connotation of the persuaded person seems to confirm the idea according to which there would seem to be a possibility of real persuasion in the rhetorical world. This interpretation understands persuasion as a regulative norm that functions as a guide for humans in this world, which by definition is rhetorical.

If persuasion is an infinite work, an endless path, then the individual will never be able to achieve it completely, and thus the way to persuasion is already *persuasion itself*. Many passages of *Persuasion and Rhetoric* lend themselves to this *tragic* reading of Michelstaedter's philosophy. I call this reading "tragic" because if persuasion is at the same time necessary and

[36] We will discuss this issue in greater depth in the next chapter.

not-achievable, then the one who aims at persuasion is bound to a destiny of failure. I find this a controversial and problematic point, and I will discuss it in greater depth in the Conclusion. In my opinion, the real "tragedy" in Michelstaedter's thought lies at the communicative level. Michelstaedter knows that his message is aporetic; persuasion cannot be communicated. Yet he fights against the destiny of his inevitable failure, and still tries to communicate his persuaded point-of-view.

On Rhetoric

Now I turn to an analysis of the first two chapters of *On Rhetoric*: "Rhetoric" and "The Constitution of Rhetoric." I will leave out the third section– "Rhetoric in Life," in which Michelstaedter describes the rhetorical forms of living in the society of his own day – a section which, while interesting, I do not consider essential for the purposes of my analysis.

Michelstaedter argues that, since the way to persuasion is an extreme and "*impossible*" choice, humans fail in pursuing such a path consistently and descend instead into rhetorical modes of life: "man wants from other things in a future time what he lacks in himself: *the possession of his own self*, and as he wants and is busied so with the future *he escapes himself in every present*" (PR, 11). As Michelstaedter explains through the circle of inadequate persuasion, humans pretend that the objects of their irrational needs are values in themselves; in this way, they think that they are free, and do not realize that they are enslaved to the rhetorical dynamic of endless insufficiency.

In the rhetorical world, everything happens according to two principles: *fear of death* and *philopsychia*. Beside them, there is a particular way in which human beings *justify* the irrationality of their living: through *linguistic and institutional knowledge*. *Knowing necessarily*

implies the rhetorical splitting of reality into knowledge and life. "[M]an '*knows*,' which is why he is always two: his *life* and his *knowing*" (PR, 66). According to Michelstaedter, linguistic knowledge expresses self-knowledge, and self-adulation. The one who affirms "I know this is," is actually affirming himself *in the face of his own reality*: he locates the arbitrary objectivation of his will outside of himself. The same affirmation – "this is" – expresses not only the will to power, but also the *reification* of such a will. Affirming "this is" is equivalent to affirming "I claim this to be." Since Michelstaedter believes that consciousness and will are the same, for him "I claim this to be" means "I want this to be," which is equivalent to saying "I *want myself claiming this to be*." Any kind of knowledge that refers to a determinate state of things demonstrates this reification of the will. Michelstaedter argues that if the "correlative" (the subject of the sentence) that is affirmed in the direct mode – "this is" – were real in itself, and not just an *arbitrary positum*, then there would be no need to affirm it. Thus, the direct mode – "this is" – is already an unconscious expression of the indirect – *connective* ("*connettivo*") – mode: "I know this is." The indirect mode makes explicit what the direct mode keeps implicit: linguistic expressions are self-referential, and the one who speaks is at the same time the speaking subject, and the hidden logical subject of his or her own propositions. In this respect, "linguistic knowledge" manifests human self-adulation. What lies behind Michelstaedter's argument is the Parmenidean identity of thought and being and of being with itself; this is the ontology on which Michelstaedter bases his critique of the institution of knowledge in general and of Plato's systematic knowledge in particular.

According to this analysis, Michelstaedter defines rhetoric as the *inadequate affirmation of individuality*.

> [W]hen he says 'I know,' 'he tells others he is alive,' in order to have from others something not given to him for his living affirmation. He wants 'to constitute a *persona*' for himself with the

> affirmation of the absolute *persona* he does not have: *it is the inadequate affirmation of individuality: rhetoric*." (PR 67-68, note omitted)

We saw that human beings pretend to achieve their self-sufficiency, through the fulfillment of their particular needs (this is the illusory or inadequate persuasion). In a similar way, humans mistakenly infer their self-sufficiency from institutional knowledge; when they claim "I know," humans implicitly mean to say "I am." This is an inadequate affirmation of their individuality: through speculation and then reflection upon such speculation (self-consciousness), humans pretend to infer their substantiality; for this reason Michelstaedter believes that *knowledge is the highest form of human self-adulation*. As La Rocca explains,[37] in Michelstaedter's thought the critique of philosophy is preceded by the critique of language, which inevitably breaks the implicit unity between humankind and its surrounding world. According to Michelstaedter, the rise of consciousness cleaves the immediate unity between subject and object that immediate or practical knowledge[38] could guarantee, even if this kind of knowledge is also what would lead humans to "inadequate persuasion." In immediate knowledge, the subject does not have or possess its knowledge. On the other hand, when human consciousness arises, the organic unity of life is split into subject and object, and the knowledge that follows from this split becomes separated and independent from life. Knowledge is thus defined by Michelstaedter as *rhetoric alongside of life*:

> They need "knowledge," and knowledge is formed. "Knowledge" in and of itself becomes the goal of life. There are parts of knowledge, a way to knowledge, men who seek it, men who give it, it is bought, sold, for this much, in that much time, with that much effort. Thus *rhetoric flourishes alongside life*. Men put themselves into a *cognitive attitude and make knowledge*.
>
> But because knowledge is needed in this manner, it is also necessary that there be demand…. The certain end, the reason for being, freedom, justice, possession, everything is given them in finite *words* applied to diverse things and then extracted from those things. If they ask for life in each thing, for each the response "to this curiosity" of theirs is ονομα επισημον, 'the name as conventional sign' (Parmenides). Then rhetoric engulfs like the current of a swollen river on

[37] La Rocca, *Nichilismo e Rettorica*, 67-68.
[38] Michelstaedter claims that this kind of knowledge is a characteristic of animals and "humble souls" (AC, 181).

> whose bank you cannot maintain your footing without getting swept into the middle. "Give the devil an inch and he takes a mile," the saying goes. Indeed *getting used to a word is like acquiring a vice*. (PR, 69-70)

Language cannot substitute itself for things or reveal their meaning, since the word is only a determination of senses that changes with respect to the particular moment and the particular speaker. The fundamental mistake of rhetoric consists in substituting a presupposed "substance" to the particular attribution of sensations. Michelstaedter thinks that the language of un-persuaded people is a camouflage that pretends to reveal a meaning, while in reality it only maintains the fear of death, hidden yet constant. We could interpret the *psyche* of the ones who are illusorily persuaded in the following way: their unconscious is constituted by the fear of death, and their conscious by the illusion of their individual self-sufficiency.

In the previous passage, Michelstaedter claimed that knowledge becomes the goal of life; humans think that in knowledge the truth is revealed and the absolute fostered. But to the human demand for the absolute, knowledge offers instead conventional signs and names that "intellectuals" apply-to and abstract-from particular determinations: knowledge is related to the process of *onomazein – naming* and *name-calling*. The process of rhetorical knowing consists of the fixation upon and hypostatization of words, the meanings of which have been established arbitrarily. As I said before, "knowing" and its crystallization in institutional forms entail the fundamental split between knowledge and life. But life is prior to any pre-established category. As we will see in the next chapter, Socrates' dialectic – or Michelstaedter's interpretation of it, at any rate – does not escape from the instances of life: never satisfied, it develops through the negation of particular determinations, and, like life, it never crystallizes into any form or category. According to Michelstaedter, the necessity of the absolute has to function as a regulative norm, since the absolute cannot be offered by any theoretical system. Socratic

negative dialectic contradicts any form of "Omni-comprehensive" theoretical system: be it Platonic, Hegelian, or Crocean.

> The absolute – I've never known it, but I know it in the way the man suffering from insomnia knows sleep, or the man watching the darkness knows light. What I know is that my consciousness, whether corporeal or soulful is made of deficiency, *that I do not have the Absolute until I am absolute, that I do not have Justice until I am just, that I do not have Freedom, Possession, Reason, the End, until I am free and finite in myself, lacking nothing that would present itself as an end in the future, but I have reasonable end here, now, all in the present. I do not wait, search, fear, and I am persuaded*. (PR, 65-66)

In relation to his discussion of "knowledge," Michelstaedter criticizes two fundamental notions: the Platonic-Aristotelian conception of "imitation," and Descartes' idea of the *cogito* (PR, 70-72).

In *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, Michelstaedter consistently demonstrates his opposition to any philosophy based on Descartes' *Meditations*. I will now offer a recapitulation of his critique of the *cogito*. According to Michelstaedter, "*cogito* does not mean 'I know'; *cogito* means I seek to know: that is, I lack knowledge: *I do not know*" (PR, 71). While Descartes based his philosophy on the proposition "I think therefore I am," Michelstaedter believes that founding knowledge on self-consciousness is an absurdity. He argues that thinking – in Cartesian terms – is seeking *knowledge*, since, in his terms, *cogitatio* means (roughly) "reflection upon." In this sense, reflection and the theoretical argumentation that follows from it are expressions of rhetoric. So "I think" means "I am rhetorically speculating," hence "I think therefore I am not persuaded," ergo "I think therefore I am NOT." Parmenidean ontology is central in this argument. Being is one and immutable, and since, for Parmenides, *logos* and being are the same, *logos* itself cannot be based on any movement. Parmenides' conception of *sophia* is thus the negation of mortal opinion, which, by contrast, *is* based on becoming, and therefore on movement. According to Michelstaedter, the *Cogito* – considered in the Cartesian-Husserlian

tradition – cannot offer the foundations for "secure" knowledge: if *cogito* means "intellectual mobility," and *cogito* is the foundation of knowledge, then knowledge is based on movement, and thus it unstable. In this regard, we read:

> If thinking means to *agitate concepts*, which *merely by this activity* must *become knowledge*, I am always empty in the present, and the care of the future wherein I feign my goal *deprives me of my entire being*. *Cogito = non-entia coagito, ergo non sum*, 'I think = I agitate non-entities; therefore, I am not.' (PR, 71)

Michelstaedter also criticizes the concept of *imitation* – which is fundamental in Plato's and Aristotle's philosophy (*mimesis*). In the *Republic*, Plato assesses the notion of "imitation" negatively, since all imitations are degradations of ideas. By contrast, Aristotle – in the *Rhetoric*, *Poetics*, and *Nicomachean Ethics* – sees "imitation" as one of the principles by which humans, especially children, learn. Michelstaedter seems to follow Plato's indications. According to him, "to follow" does not mean "to imitate," and the one who wants to follow the way of persuasion will never find a pre-established path, but only examples of persuasion. As I have said before, the way to persuasion entails "solitude" and "silence"; the metaphors of desert, solitude, and silence all point to the individuality and uniqueness of the mode of persuasion. Even if Michelstaedter offers us examples of persuaded persons, there is no possibility of imitating such people: being an individual path, the way to persuasion cannot be achieved through imitation of others, or in any other way. In contradiction of mainstream Christian theology, Michelstaedter says that even Christ saved only himself:

> The first Christians made the sign of the fish and believed themselves saved. If they had only made more fish, they would have been truly saved because by so doing they would have recognized that Christ saved himself, because out of his mortal life he was able to create god, the individual. (PR, 72, note omitted)

CHAPTER TWO: PLATONIC INTERPRETATIONS

The *Critical Appendices* – which follow *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, in an Italian edition published by Adelphi[39] – are fundamental to understanding the genealogy of Michelstaedter's main work, since they represent his original thesis project. The Appendices show us how the author's analysis of Classical rhetoric represents the starting-point for Michelstaedter's philosophy, and that, according to him, "Plato and Aristotle represent two decisive stages of the word's absolute dominance over the world."[40] Unfortunately the Critical Appendices have not been translated into English yet; I will thus refer to the Italian edition.

Even if Michelstaedter's original thesis project concerned the analysis of the concepts of persuasion and rhetoric in both Plato and Aristotle, it is only Plato who becomes a continual, if hidden reference in *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. Michelstaedter sees in Plato the formation of the "persuaded" individual, *and* then the transformation into the "rhetorical" philosopher. In Plato's corpus we can find the origin of what Michelstaedter characterizes as "persuasion" – best simplified by Socrates' practices as depicted in the *Apology* and *Gorgias* – as well as the beginning of the decay into rhetoric – the systematic thought that, according to Michelstaedter, begins with the *Phaedrus* and *Parmenides*. Aristotle, on the other hand, already stands outside of any possible persuasion; he is the very philosopher of *philopsychia*, the first one who systematized rhetoric, and consequently created a rhetorical system that was intended to encompass the whole of reality.

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[39] Carlo Michelstaedter, *La Persuasione e la Rettorica. Appendici Critiche*, (Milan: Adelphi, 1995).
[40] La Rocca, *Nichilismo e Rettorica*, 15.

Michelstaedter located the beginning of Platonic philosophy's decadence in the shift of perspectives that we see between the "young" dialogues and the "mature" works,[41] for example, the differences of perspective that appear in comparing the *Republic* to the *Apology*. For Michelstaedter, Plato in his later works seems to reveal a certain Aristotelian fascination:

> But certainly the last dialogues and especially the *Parmenides* are pervaded by an Aristotelian spirit and seem a prelude to the Categories [*sic*] and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. Of the Platonic they have no more than clichés. One can also openly say that they were not made by Plato but by one who had nothing to say and struggled to harmonize the system of ideas with the necessities of a polymorphous speech…or perhaps the author was Plato himself, though a Plato who was old and forgetful, or one of his disciples (PR, 84, note).

In contrast to all of this, in Plato's early dialogues Michelstaedter sees one of the emblems of Persuasion: Socrates, who is never satisfied with particular determinations, persists, guided by his daimon, in the search for the One and the Good "in-itself."

According to Michelstaedter, Socrates *symbolizes the unity of life and thought* – the same unity of being and thought that Parmenides' fragments express. Socrates' philosophy is the very opposite of a closed theoretical system; it is based on the *concrete dialogical investigation* – which develops through irony and maieutics – and for this reason it presupposes the existential involvement of the individual. If the individual wants to be persuaded, he or she needs to seek value, which cannot be expressed by a system of thought, but which has to be *pragmatically* achieved through dialogue: "the only power of language is the power of the philosopher's living word, which is also his only activity. Any written form arrests concepts arbitrarily" (AC, 246). Individual value originates only in the concrete encounter between two individualities. Michelstaedter believes that this "old" Plato, along with Aristotle, abandoned the way to which Socrates pointed; they detached the faculties of thought from the experiential and existential

[41] The metaphor of "youth" has often been present in these pages. "Youth" plays an important role in the frameworks of Michelstaedter, Lukács, Plato, and in the essays of Cacciari. I decided not to discuss Michelstaedter's suicide, but, in this respect, it seems that, by committing suicide, Michelstaedter *opted definitively for permanent youth*.

dimension of Socratic investigation. Plato, in particular, falsified Socrates' philosophy, by offering a systematic version of it; in this way, his representation became falsely rational and thus, *ironically*, irrational. According to Michelstaedter, as a close follower of Socrates, it is only through the dialogue between two subjects that individual value can arise, for individual value arises differently in accordance with any new conversational exchange.

The "old" Plato forgot or ignored Socrates' teachings, and submitted to the temptation of rhetoric. According to Michelstaedter, the difference in intellectual attitude that Plato manifests in passing from the *Gorgias* to the *Phaedrus* is emblematic of the shift from persuasion to rhetoric, even if the *Phaedrus*, in many respects, follows and positively develops some of the *Gorgias*' indications. These two dialogues are in fact the particular texts that Michelstaedter selects, respectively, with which to admire and condemn the Greek philosopher. He believes that Plato moved away from the creativity and living power of the maieutics of Socrates, and opted for the *apology* of his method.

> In the *Phaedrus*, Plato realizes, with unsurpassed efficacy, the value of the *Socratic way* in relation to the other people's impotence; and at that same point, *presenting it as finite and considering it, he stopped*. And, since the Socratic way is precisely not a way like any other, because it denies any closure [*fermata*] and always proclaims itself unfinished, complacently lingering on it means abandoning it forever. (AC, 172)

According to Michelstaedter, Plato did not recognize that he had renounced Socratic dialectic by offering an apology for it: "*Phaedrus* offers the apology of dialectic – and in this respect it is no longer dialectical but apologetic; it demonstrates the impotence of any rhetoric in the face of dialectic – and at that point dialectic is already rhetoric" (AC, 172).

For Michelstaedter, while Socrates' dialectical way is a method that entails constant care for the present – what he calls a *permanere*, or *persisting* – Plato's way is a blind "proceeding." In contrast, Michelstaedter describes Socrates' philosophy in this way: "this is the voice of the

god he has in his breast, the voice that affirms itself in the definitive negation and does not pretend to offer sufficient values [*non finge valori sufficienti*] … *His life is not a process but a stasis*" (AC, 172-173).

The Platonic system is an artificial "mechanism" that, hiding behind the apparent stability of empty concepts, re-presents the same movement of rhetorical becoming in a different light.

> In his love of liberty, Socrates resented being subject to the law of gravity. And he thought the good lay in independence from gravity, because it is this, he thought, that prevents us from rising to the sun.
>
> Being independent from gravity means not having weight, and Socrates did not allow himself rest until he had eliminated all his weight. But having consumed together the hope of freedom and slavery, the independent spirit and gravity, the necessity of the earth and the will for the sun, he neither flew to the sun nor remained on earth; he was neither independent nor a slave, neither happy nor wretched. But about him I have nothing more to say.
>
> Plato saw this wondrous end of the master and was disquieted. For he had the same great love, though he was not of so desperate a devotion. So he concentrated on meditating. He had to find a μηκάνημα, a 'mechanism,' to raise himself to the sun, but, deceiving gravity, *without losing weight, body, life*. He meditated for a long time, and then invented the *macrocosm* (PR, 77-78).

This passage is the beginning of what Michelstaedter calls "an historical example" (PR, 77-84); here he metaphorically explains how Plato has forgotten Socrates' teachings and how, consequently, he was not able to guarantee the stability of being he desired. Socrates' dialectic was committed to *rational value*, the value that is "in itself persuading." Socratic investigation advanced through the negation of any particular datum that wanted to be affirmed as a good "in itself." Socrates intended to show his interlocutors how the particular examples they were offering in the dialogues did not represent the goal of their research. According to Michelstaedter, Socratic questioning about the *what* was equivalent to asking if something could be a *good* or a *value* in itself and for itself; in Michelstaedter's terms, this means asking if something has *persuasive value*. "Anything that was not a *good*, a *value*, it was not a thing for Socrates, just a meaningless name" (AC, 143).

The second appendix to *Persuasion and Rhetoric* is entitled *Notes to the Sad Story* ("*Note alla Triste Istoria*") and it offers a theoretical explanation of what Michelstaedter describes metaphorically in the "historical example." I will use it now in order to develop my analysis of Michelstaedter's re-appropriation of Socratic-Platonic thought.

Socrates developed his dialogical investigation through the repetition of the fundamental question: "*ti estin*," "what is it?" With this question, Socrates looked for the "rational value," i.e. persuasive value, a value not related to particular opinions. Every time an interlocutor introduced a certain word or concept, Socrates asked him or her to describe the nature of such words or concepts. Socrates asked "*ti estin*," "what is it (in itself)?" Once the nature of the particular "estin," or being, had been analyzed, Socrates could decide whether or not it represented a good and a value in itself. If it did not, such a being, concept or word was rejected as a meaningless empty noun.

By contrast, the "late" Plato proposed a set of concepts, the nature of which he had not previously examined. He assumed categories and concepts, not questioning their nature and not asking "*ti estin*." For Michelstaedter, this particular attitude confirmed that Plato had abandoned the quest for persuasion, and that he betrayed Socrates' teachings in order to assume a speculative position, which is the essence of rhetoric as knowledge. The Platonic system pretended to *deliver* things, whereas actually it only *talked about* things. As his ultimate goal, "for *persuasion in life*, [Plato] substitutes this system, which does not give things, but *talks about things*" (AC, 144). Michelstaedter understands Platonic philosophy as the attempt to offer rational dominion, through categories and ideas, over the whole of reality. Since Michelstaedter, in agreement with Schopenhauer, believes that what we call reality, in its perpetual becoming, is just the manifestation of the contradictory logic of needs, he also believed that Plato's attempt to

fashion a *system* of knowledge was an act of hubris. Michelstaedter thinks that Plato wanted to bring the infinite into the finite and offer

> *the stability of the unstable*: the door of the infinite philosophical rhetoric is open – *Now everything is worthy of being said*; every relation that is recognized is an idea, since good inheres in everything, and every idea has a citizenship in the world of the absolute. The way of abstractions has no limit, nor criterion. (AC, 155)

By contrast, Socratic dialectic did not distinguish between ontological determination and ethical-existential value; Plato abandoned this equation precisely because, through the process of *abstraction*, he opted for theorization and speculation instead.

Here we face a large interpretative problem: how do we combine Michelstaedter's critique of Plato's methodology of abstraction, which sacrifices *concrete* reality in favor of ideas, and his critique of the concept of *philopsychia*, which also belongs to Plato's philosophy?[42] According to Michelstaedter the decisive solution to this problem consists in adhering completely to Socratic dialectic, which always asks if the particular object of our investigations is either a good "in itself" or – since *tertium non datur* – a mere "thing among things." Plato did not adhere consistently to Socratic dialectic, because he introduced that "infamous little word" (AC, 165), *kata*, which prevents the distinction between relative values and values in themselves. According to Socrates – Michelstaedter says – if the object analyzed represented a value "with respect to – *kata* – our needs," then it could not represent a value "in itself"; Plato ignored this fundamental distinction. Nevertheless Michelstaedter insists ironically that it was Plato himself who pointed out the (Socratic) way to persuasion: "it is not me who teaches these things to Plato, since if I did not know them – and assuming I know them – I could learn them only from him" (AC, 165). The *Apology* and *Gorgias* are counter-posed to the later systematic dialogues, like the

[42] In this respect, we also face a probably larger problem: can we distinguish so sharply between a young (persuaded) Plato and an old (rhetorical) Plato?

Parmenides, *Sophist*, and *Republic*; the former works constitute the source of Michelstaedter's conception of "persuasion." As I have said before, the attitude of "not fearing death" derives from Socrates' behavior in the *Apology*, while *Gorgias*' myth of "the naked soul" expresses the same drive of the persuaded person: "that supreme *individual* necessity of absolute, of liberation (self ab-solving) from any relativity."[43]

For Michelstaedter, the decadence of later Platonic thought became evident when the system of correspondence between the world of things and the world of ideas reached its most highly developed articulation. The incorruptible world of ideas, which should have functioned as a model for the world of things, became a mere reflection of rhetorical relational determinations. The world of ideas came to be seen as an *out-of-time* copy of the world of things: ideas were indeed extraneous to the becoming of "this" world, but only to the extent that they represented abstractions from becoming itself. According to Michelstaedter, the same ideas that once had been the criteria for the persuaded person to unmask rhetorical language, in the later Plato came to represent a system of *abstract names* that expressed the hypostatization of rhetorical language. Thus Michelstaedter's critique of Plato is addressed not to the "Idea" itself, but rather to its "rhetorical" contamination and degeneration. As Cacciari says, "Michelstaedter's polemic wants to 'save' the idea from the 'decay' into the *infinite weave of forms*…. The war on *metaxy* ["the in-between"] and on dialectical *symploke* ["form-associativeness"] derives from the necessity of 'saving' the idea, in its intuitive *im-mediateness* … from the modes of correlativity."[44] Michelstaedter wants to save the "idea" from any discursive reduction.

In summary, Michelstaedter criticized Plato for falsifying Socratic dialectic, and transforming in it into an empty theoretical system. Plato created a system of concepts through a

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[43] Cacciari, *La Lotta 'su' Platone*, 93.
[44] Ibid., 97

process of abstraction: he created categories from the analysis of particular determinations, and subsequently he forced the whole world of becoming into his system. In this way, Plato forgot "life" and its instances. With Plato, "world and life become a theory…. Life escaped from discourse, since in discourse Plato pretended life to be sufficient" (AC, 196). As Pieri notes,

> *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s judgment about persuasion's genesis (Socrates) and its rhetorical overturning (Plato and Aristotle) follows an interpretation of and a reflection upon the modalities that Greek thought adopted in its philosophical and scientific climax. Michelstaedter identifies the breaking point in the split between a criterion of knowledge still linked to life's principles and a theoretical-scientific criterion elevated to global wisdom.[45]

We can also see that Michelstaedter's critique is constituted by two points, which, as we will see in the Conclusion, seem to move in two different directions. Michelstaedter criticized Plato (1) for rhetorically corrupting the persuasive *idea*, and (2) for ignoring the concrete elements of life. *Plato is the first philosopher who separated "knowledge" from "life."* Through the (mis)use of language, he created a system that contemplated two different worlds: the world of ideas, and the world of things. The fundamental problem of Platonic philosophy is due first to the progressive abandonment of the Parmenidean-Socratic way, and second to the institution of a finite linguistic system that pretended to organize the infinite within words. According to La Rocca, the "rhetorical" metamorphosis of Platonic philosophy started when Plato organized his philosophy into a linguistic system, and – for Michelstaedter – any linguistic knowledge represents self-knowledge, which separates the individual from the immediateness of life.[46]

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[45] Pieri, *La Scienza del Tragico*, 207.
[46] See La Rocca, *Nichilismo e Rettorica*, 66-67.

CHAPTER THREE: FAMILY RESEMBLANCES

In the first and the second chapter I have offered an analysis of Michelstaedter's thought and a recapitulation of Michelstaedter's interpretation of Parmenidean, Socratic, and Platonic philosophy. I will now discuss two philosophical works that are close contemporaries to *Persuasion and Rhetoric*: György Lukács' *Soul and Form* (1910), and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922).

The present chapter offers an abbreviated discussion of my larger project, which consists of an analysis of certain philosophical tendencies that were present in the early twentieth century in what I have called "Middle-European" culture. These tendencies are exemplified by the common ethos that Cacciari discusses in *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter* and *Metafisica della Gioventù*, the specific interpretations and re-appropriations of pre-Socratic thought, and the problematic relation between certain intellectuals and more institutional academic knowledge.

In addition to Carlo Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, and the "young" works of György Lukács and Ludwig Wittgenstein, my aim in subsequent research will be to analyze the early philosophical career of Martin Heidegger, the "mature" thought of Georg Simmel, and Otto Weinenger's seminal text, *Sex and Character*. The project will also include a discussion of Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arthur Schopenhauer.

György Lukács' Soul and Form

The first edition of *Soul and Form* was published in Hungarian in 1910, the year of Michelstaedter's death; one year later, the book was translated into German. *Soul and Form* is considered to be the fundamental work of the *young* (pre-Marxist) Lukács, and it consists of a

collection of interpretative essays in which Lukács discusses the poetics of several thinkers, such as Beer-Hoffmann, Ernst, George, Kassner, Kierkegaard, Novalis, Philippe, and Sterne. The peculiarity of these essays resides in the fact that they are not just an analysis or criticism of another author's thought; instead, Lukács engages in a sort of intellectual dialogue with such thinkers, and in this way, he interrogates the notions of "soul" and "form."

The first composition, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay," is a letter (dated October, 1910) that Lukács wrote in Florence to his friend Leo Popper. Here we meet the crucial questions of Lukács' entire project: what is the essential *nature* of the essay? Is there a specific *form* of the essay? Lukács defines the essay as an art form and not a science. "Science affects us by its contents, art by its forms; science offers us facts and relationships between facts, but art offers us souls and destinies" (SF, 3). The essay is precisely "an art form, an autonomous and integral giving-of-form to an autonomous and complete life" (SF, 17). The essay is counter-posed to "the petty completeness of scientific exactitude" (SF 17), and to the scientific idea of objectivity, since it can only express an endless interpretation. This does not mean that the essay offers a merely subjective reading, because it is also counter-posed to subjective "impressionistic freshness" (SF, 17)[47]; the essay is objective to the extent that it aims at the truth, the idea. Like the lover who aims at the beloved, we can interpret the essayist as a lover, whose love for his or her subject resembles the Platonic *Eros*, described in the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. "*Erotic* is the very nature of the essay's form."[48]

"The idea is there before any of its expressions, it is a soul-value, a world-moving and life-forming force in itself: and that is why such criticism will always speak of life where it is most alive" (SF, 16). Lukács' conception of the essay seems to be the perfect form of *mediation*

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[47] Lukács' philosophy at this time was constituted in opposition both to scientific positivism and to the relativism of impressionism.
[48] Cacciari, *Metafisica della Gioventù*, 87.

between the idea in itself and the world of flux, change and temporality, while his description of the essayist's role reflects the erotic-hermeneutic attitude of the "neo-Platonic" philosopher.

According to Cacciari's *Metafisica della Gioventù*, "the 'conversation' between the *young* Lukács and the already-*mature* [*già compiuto*] Michelstaedter needs to be considered among the most extraordinary documents of contemporary thought that is engaged *against* aesthetic culture."[49] Lukács thinks that "aesthetic culture" lacks a center; the aesthetic type is only driven by his or her impressions, hence nothing is really a thing "in itself." Michelstaedter – in his *Dialogo della Salute*[50] – sees the aesthetic world as the world of insatiability [*insaziabilità*] and of lack. The aesthetic type thinks that things in the world can fulfill his or her desires, and also that everything depends upon his or her own efforts. In reality, the aesthetic type is the most dependent of people: possessed by the objects of his or her own desires.

Lukács thinks that "there are, then, two types of reality of the soul: one is *life* and the other *living*; both are equally effective, but they can never be effective at the same time" (SF, 4). The dichotomy of life versus living is mirrored in other dualisms: universal concepts, (Platonic Ideas) versus names and things; and significance versus the image. We may say that, in some respects, Lukács' distinction between life and living is very similar to Michelstaedter's distinction between persuasion and rhetoric. Moreover, as Lukács investigates the essence of "life," he encounters some of the same contradictions that the first pages of *Persuasion and Rhetoric* describe. In "The Metaphysics of Tragedy," the last of *Soul and Form*'s essays, we read:

> Life is an anarchy of light and dark: nothing is ever completely fulfilled in life, nothing ever quite ends; new, confusing voices always mingle with the chorus of those that have been heard before. Everything flows, everything merges into another thing, and the mixture is uncontrolled and impure; everything is destroyed, everything is smashed, nothing ever flowers into real life. To live

[49] Ibid., 113.
[50] Carlo Michelstaedter, *Il Dialogo della Salute*, 59-64.

> is to live something through to the end: but *life* means that nothing is ever fully and completely lived through to the end. Life is the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable existences; one can describe it only negatively – by saying that something always happens to disturb and interrupt the flow. Schelling wrote: 'We say a thing lasts because its existence is not in conformity with its nature.' Real life is always unreal, always impossible, in the midst of empirical life. (SF, 152-153)

The similarities between Lukács' and Michelstaedter's descriptions of "life" are stunning. In their analysis, both authors refer to Heraclitus' claim "πάντα ρει (everything flows)," and think that nothing can ever be truly accomplished in life. Just as Michelstaedter sees persuaded life as "impossible," (*abios bios*), Lukács claims that real life is always unreal, and impossible to achieve in empirical reality. Michelstaedter's persuasion and Lukács' later notion of goodness[51] are cognate ideas; both concepts express the same paradox. Michelstaedter and Lukács discover "the vanity of forms"; both try "to *think* beyond them, and to situate thought beyond their norm."[52] Nevertheless, the nature of the essay as infinite interpretation is what differentiates Lukács from Michelstaedter, whose notion of persuasion is opposed to any discursiveness, and, for this reason, opposed to Lukács' essay. Discursiveness (like any philosophy based on the *cogito*) is based on movement and dilatation of time; *in Michelstaedter' view*, *none of temporality's forms can attest to the authenticity of persuasion*.[53]

In the Introduction, I suggested that in both Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and Lukács' *Soul and Form something* is decided in relation to Platonic philosophy. According to Lukács, certain essays, like Plato's dialogues,[54] deal with existential questions. Plato was the greatest essayist in this sense, since he was able to "connect his questions, the most profound questions ever asked, with life as lived" (SF, 3). For Lukács, the life of Socrates is the *life most*

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[51] "The good, claims Lukács in *On Poverty of Spirit* (1911), eludes every rule of morality" (Harrison, *1910*, 5). Cacciari explains that Lukács' notion of goodness means "life beyond forms"; it is the grace that allows individuals to break from the forms, and it expresses the paradox of "the impossible becoming action." Cacciari, *Metafisica della Gioventù*, 110.
[52] Cacciari, *Metafisica della Gioventù*, 114.
[53] Ibid., 115.
[54] Lukács considers Platonic dialogues as "essays."

typical of the essay's form – "Socrates always lived in the ultimate questions," (SF, 13). "The 'Platonism' of the young Lukács…originates as the experience of the problem of form." Saving the phenomenon in its finitude coincides with saving the idea. According to Cacciari, the only way to save both the idea and the phenomenon is to understand the latter as an event, [*Ereignis*]. Cacciari imagines Lukács' Platonism as *melancholic*: "Saving the idea is one with seeing the idea's distance from its *root*, seeing the idea *mournfully*."[55] Lukács' thought thus encounters a doubled Platonic problem: on the one hand, he tries to "conceive the idea in the time, *gottlos*, of its 'not-intuitability'; on the other hand, he wants to express the idea in the form of the ought to-*Sollen*, in the form of the imperative, as a principle different from theoretical certainty."[56] Therefore the Platonism of the young Lukács is also denoted by a strong neo-Kantian ethical intonation; his Platonism is both erotic, and ethical.

As we saw in the previous chapter, Michelstaedter interpreted Plato's corpus as a divided in a young (persuaded) period and an old (rhetorical) period. He also opted for a "non-discursive" Platonic philosophy, in order to support his peculiar way of thought. He I think that Michelstaedter would have agreed with Lukács' interpretation of Plato as the greatest essayist, but since the essay is essentially interpretation, it is also rhetoric, and thus Plato, in Michelstaedter's view, was probably the greatest of all rhetorical thinkers, which is no compliment.

Cacciari claims that, despite his preference for discursiveness, Lukács tries to think *beyond* forms, and *beyond* correlativity. He tries to situate certain experiences *beyond* the level of linguistic articulation.

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[55] Cacciari, *Metafisica della Gioventù*, 75.
[56] Ibid.

> There are experiences, then, which cannot be expressed by any gesture and which yet long for expression.…I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality, as spontaneous principle of existence; the world-view in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life…. When a man experiences such things, then everything that is outward about him awaits in rigid immobility the outcome of the struggle between invisible forces to which the senses have no access. Any gesture with which such a man might wish to express something of his experience would falsify that experience, unless it ironically emphasizes its own inadequacy and thus cancelled itself out. (SF, 7)

Can we consider Michelstaedter's persuasion – understood as a phenomenon of divination – as one such experience? What Lukács describes in this passage seems to be precisely the tragic destiny of the one who is persuaded: persuasion cannot be articulated in (rhetorical) language; any attempt to describe persuasion would falsify it; and any worldly language is inadequate to express it. This is another form of Michelstaedter's soulful aporia.

Ludwig Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* first appeared in German in 1921, and was published in English in 1922 with a famous introduction by Bertrand Russell. The *Tractatus* is considered to be one of the more difficult philosophical works of the twentieth century. Despite the *Tractatus*' scientific rigor and logical structure, scholars from a variety of disciplines have been engaged in interpreting the meaning of certain propositions. When Wittgenstein's work first appeared, it was welcomed with great enthusiasm, especially by the so-called Vienna Circle; nevertheless many intellectuals – Otto Neurath, for example – were skeptical about the "philosophy on the ineffable" expressed there. In this section, I will also offer an interpretation of what the *Tractatus* possibly points to: what it explicitly *does not say*, and suggests passing over in silence instead. The main inspirations for my reading of Wittgenstein are Harrison's *1910*, and Cacciari's *Interpretazione di Michelstaedter*; along with these authors, I am aware that

the following interpretation is controversial, yet intriguing if compared to Michelstaedter's and Lukács' thought.

According to Wittgenstein, "[t]he world is all that is the case" (1 – TL, 5)[57] ; everything that happens in the world is accidental. In different terms, the world is the totality of facts (not of objects), a facts is "the existence of states of affairs" (2 – TL, 5), and states of affairs are combinations of objects (things). Words name objects, and relations between objects can be expressed in propositional grammar. Therefore the task of language is to *describe* the world in a logical way; on the other hand, language cannot explain *why* the world is how it is and not otherwise. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wants to draw a distinction between what can and cannot be expressed with language; at the end of his work he claims that what can be said, must also be said clearly; by contrast, what cannot be said must be passed over in silence (7 – TL, 89). According to Harrison, this self-limiting of language is the whole sense of the *Tractatus.* "The self-professed mission of the *Tractatus*, then, is to prescribe the proper usage of language – the limits within which things can be legitimately described."[58]

All logical propositions are tautologies – anyone who understands the *Tractatus* "eventually recognizes them as nonsensical" (6.54-TL, 89) – and cannot touch the real problems of *life*. In his Introduction, Wittgenstein claims: "[i]f this work has any value, it consists in two things: the first is that thoughts are expressed in it… the second thing in which the value of this work consists is that it shows how little is achieved when these problems are solved" (TL, 3-4).

The distance between language and life, as well as the notion of silence are what link Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* to Michelstaedter's *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. If Michelstaedter's thought and Wittgenstein's philosophy are at a first glance incompatible, and perhaps even

[57] What ought to be the case lies outside the world.
[58] Harrison, *1910*, 185.

opposed to one another, then it is also true that, as Cacciari says, in Wittgenstein's silence we can hear Michelstaedter's attempt to speak. The ontology of the *Tractatus* is completely different from Michelstaedter's framework, and Wittgenstein's conception of language, if compared to Michelstaedter's, is what the latter would call "rhetorical." The logical language described by the *Tractatus* is precisely what Michelstaedter criticizes as the empty process of naming and name-calling. Nevertheless, Harrison says that "in another reading, …the *Tractatus* appears even more interested in carving out a space for what *cannot* be said in propositional language, as though to preserve it from violation."[59] We may claim that, with respect to life, both Wittgenstein and Michelstaedter see language as a self-negating vehicle. The following proposition from the *Tractatus* seems to express the *rhetorical* level of language, the tautology of philosophical thought, and the paradox of useless saying:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)
>
> He must transcend these propositions and then he will see the world aright. (6.54 – TL, 89)

Moreover, in the *Tractatus* a sense of the ineffable emerges: "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical" (6.522 – TL, 89). With respect to what is mystical – experiencing that life *is*, for example – language is useless, and in Michelstaedter's terms, strictly rhetorical.

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* leaves the reader with silence and with a sense of philosophical aporia. The one who understands the *Tractatus* will also recognize its prepositions as nonsensical and impotent with respect to life. To see the world aright, propositional language must be transcended.

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[59] Harrison, *1910*, 185.

CONCLUSION: DIALECTIC, APORIA, AND PARMENIDES' BEING

Come, I shall tell you, and do you listen and convey the story,
What routes of inquiry alone there are for thinking:
The One – that [it] is*, and that* [it] cannot be,
Is the path of Persuasion (for it attends the truth)
- Parmenides, Fragment 2.[60]

It seems that Michelstaedter's investigation leads to an aporetic conclusion: the human world and human language are essentially rhetorical, and the entire realm of worldly being appears to be only manifestation of rhetoric. In a similar way, Parmenides characterizes the "mortals' way" as a misinterpretation of "being." And yet the only alternative that Michelstaedter offers to Rhetoric – Persuasion – is, if not a contradictory concept, then at least unutterable and impossible to pursue in *this* world. Is this truly an aporia, or is it rather the contradictory moment of a dialectical process? *Persuasion and Rhetoric* opens with this *tragic* claim:

> I know I am talking because I'm talking, but I also know I shall not persuade anyone, and this is *dishonesty*; but rhetoric αναγκάζει με ταυτα δραν βία "forcibly compels me to do things"; in other words, "if you bite into a crabapple, you've got to spit it out" (PR, 4, note omitted, emphasis mine).

As we can see, the dichotomy of "persuasion" versus "rhetoric" appears explicitly at the very beginning of the book. The one who wants to point to the way to persuasion – Michelstaedter, in this case – has to use rhetoric in order to express his persuasion. How would it otherwise be possible to "communicate" persuasion if not by means of language, which is essentially rhetorical? Hegel might say that persuasion has to pass through its negation – rhetoric – in order to be communicated. But Michelstaedter does not understand the paradox of *Persuasion and Rhetoric* as a moment of dialectical unfolding. It rather seems to be an irresolvable aporia. We

[60] *Parmenides of Elea*, 55.

should remember that, according to Michelstaedter, there are two types of persuasion: illusory (or inadequate) persuasion and real persuasion. Illusory persuasion is represented as a *vicious circle*, through which humans pretend to be sufficient unto themselves. Being a vicious circle, this kind of persuasion keeps repeating itself, and thus can only lead humans to an illusion of self-sufficiency. On the other hand, real persuasion is defined in opposition to rhetoric, and thus as an alternative to it. We can therefore conclude that *persuasion* (be it illusory or real) *cannot be the synthetic moment of a rhetorical dialectic*.

In the second chapter, I offered a comparative reading of Michelstaedter's thought and Platonic philosophy. It is important to notice how *Persuasion and Rhetoric*'s paradoxes recall *aporiai* that were already present in several Platonic dialogues. The *Gorgias*, as I noted, represents an extremely important influence on Michelstaedter, and one may even claim that *Persuasion and Rhetoric* reflects the *Gorgias*' arguments directly.[61] It seems that this transitional Platonic dialogue offers the same "conscious" contradiction that Michelstaedter's work presents: *having to fight words with other words*:

> *Con le parole guerra alle parole*
> *siccome aure nebbiose l'aria viva*
> *disperde perchè pur il sol risplenda –*
> *la qual per suo valor non s'avvantaggia.*
>
> *Using words to fight with words*
> *since living breath disperses misty auras*
> *so that the sun itself can shine –*
> *of no value to the breath alone.*
> (AC, 134)[62]

The *Gorgias* is "unconsciously" permeated with the same problem: the insuperability of language's rhetorical status. Socrates exhorts Gorgias, Polus and Callicles to present their ideas

[61] I attempted to such a reading, offering a comparison between *Persuasion and Rhetoric* and the *Gorgias* in my previous thesis, *Carlo Michelstaedter Lettore di Platone.*
[62] Translation by Louis Ruprecht and Massimiliano Moschetta.

brachylogically – in a concise way – and not to use *macrology* – long speeches – or *epideixis*,[63] which are primarily rhetorical techniques. But this same Socrates, in this same dialogue, presents his thesis with extremely long and flowery speeches; therefore he seems to use the same rhetoric that he aims to criticize, and through it, to *win over* his opponents.

So much for rhetoric. But what about the "madness" of persuasion? In the *Timaeus* we read:

> No man, when in his wits, attains prophetic truth and inspiration, but when he receives the inspired word, either his intelligence is enthralled in sleep or he is demented by some distemper or possession. And he who would understand what he remembers to have been said…by the prophetic and inspired nature…must first recover his wits. But, while he continues demented, he cannot judge of the visions which he sees or the words which he utters. (*Timaeus* 71e-72a)

Persuasion negates rhetoric, and yet in order to negate it, it must use rhetorical language. "Persuasion" is thus affected by the same paradoxes that Plato presents in the phenomenon of *divination*: the human being is incompetent to render judgment on his experiences, and thus to express his or her own experience of persuasion. If it is true that the one who is outside persuasion – the rhetorical person – cannot communicate it, the same must be said for the one who is persuaded. On the one hand, "[*h*]*e who does not have persuasion cannot communicate it* … 'Surely a blind man cannot lead the blind'" (PR, 11, reference and note omitted). On the other hand, the persuaded person is "alone and distinct among others, for his voice is not his voice, and he neither knows it nor can communicate it to others" (PR, 11). Michelstaedter suggests that the persuaded person's voice "is not his voice"; his voice is the voice of the god he holds in his breast, a very different god from the god of *philopsychia*. We may conclude that, *rather than*

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[63] "Thus there would necessarily be three genera of rhetorics: *symbouleutikon* ["deliberative"], *dikanikon* ["judicial"], *epideiktikon* ["demonstrative"]." Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, Book I, Chapter 3, 48. *Epideixis* is a particular branch of rhetorics that, according to Aristotle, deals with praise and blame, what is beautiful or vile. *Epideixis* has often been linked to "sophistry." Roman theorists, from Cicero to Quintilian, considered *epideixis* to be a degenerate form of eloquence.

possessing persuasion, the one who is persuaded is possessed. Plato speaks of *mania* this way,[64] and we might say that it is only as *mania* – not as *episteme* – that persuasion can be distinguished from rhetoric.[65]

Up to this point, we have examined the *aporia* that Michelstaedter recognizes as belonging to his discourse. Nevertheless, he does not seem to be aware of other issues that arise if we compare his thought to the philosophy of Parmenides, whose conception of being should function as the ontological basis of *Persuasion and Rhetoric*. Michelstaedter's philosophy pertains to the individual, but, if we want to relate the individual to Parmenidean ontology, then is not individuality itself a particular determination, and thus *separate* from Being? How should we consider the individual in relation to the Parmenidean One? Michelstaedter claims that the one who is persuaded "must *cultivate individual value in the living, and, making his own life always richer in negations, create himself and the world*" (PR, 53). In this sense, how can the persuaded person, who creates his world *ex-nihilo* each time, be connected to the totality, which, according to Parmenides is, has always been, and will always be one and unchangeable?

The persuaded person wants the totality and wants to be one with the totality, but can totality be something *wanted* or *desired*? Do not "volition" and "will" belong essentially to the constituent terminology of *rhetoric*? It is worth noticing that in *Persuasion and Rhetoric* Michelstaedter conceives the achievement of "Goodness," or "Justice," always in terms of *possession* and *dominion*. He often characterizes the figure of the persuaded person as the *one who really has or possesses* certain properties or elements. This linguistic tendency cannot be merely a stylistic choice, and, for this reason, it brings to the surface another problematic aspect of Michelstaedter's language choices. On the one hand, he highlights Parmenides' idea of

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[64] *Phaedrus* 244a-245c.
[65] Cf. Cacciari, *La Lotta 'su' Platone*, 94.

"being" as the fundamental ontology on which "persuasion" is based; on the other hand, he seems to describe persuasion as the most coherent manifestation/actualization of will to power. Persuasion is often described as a choice – even if an *impossible* choice – and rhetoric as a destiny. In addition to these contradictory tendencies, Michelstaedter describes persuasion as absolute self-possession, actuality beyond potency, and total dominion, which are all *empowered rhetorical categories*. In this respect, I quote Giorgio Brianese, whose work – *L'Arco e il Destino* – represents the most coherent "Parmenidean" critique of *Persuasion and Rhetoric*: "persuasion, far from being totally 'other' than rhetoric, is actually its extreme empowerment, and it maintains its fundamental characteristics, from which it is not able to escape."[66] In Brianese's terms, "persuasion" and "rhetoric" cannot remain two entirely opposed and alternative modalities of existence, which would symbolize *authentic* and *inauthentic life*, respectively. "Persuasion" differs from "rhetoric" only insofar as it represents the expression of total possession; on the other hand, "rhetoric" is the inadequate and insufficient manifestation of the will to power.

Michelstaedter decided to open *Persuasion and Rhetoric* with a quote from Sophocles' *Electra*: "*I know my behavior is unseemly and becomes me ill*" (PR, 1). Why did Michelstaedter claim that his behavior was unseemly? He knew that his discourse was aporetic, and rhetorical almost by his own definition. He knew that he could not persuade anyone, because persuasion is not the end of rhetoric, rather its alternative. He also knew that he had written a non-thesis as his thesis. And thus Michelstaedter was "ill" – poisoned by rhetoric, because "[r]hetoric is a phenomenon of poisoning" (AC, 152), and it was rhetoric that forced him to write; "in other words, 'if you bite into a crabapple, you've got to spit it out'" (PR, 4, note omitted).

[66] Brianese, *L'Arco e il Destino*, 157-158.

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