

Modernism and Rhetoric. Pirandello and Michelstaedter

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Abstract

The article proposes to analyze the criticisms made by Luigi Pirandello (*On Humor*, 1908) and Carlo Michelstaedter (*Persuasion and Rhetoric*, 1909-1910) in regard to the classical idea of Rhetoric. It also proposes to show how the two different approaches derive from differing interpretations of the new modernist themes. For Pirandello, referring to the principles of imitation of the rules of rhetoric means to re-propose, in works of art, universally accepted truths, suppressing in them the new modernist awareness that has upset the previous 'direct' link between life and representation. Michelstaedter, instead, believes that the rejection of the old Rhetoric does not erase the imitative relation, because with the loss of the timeless referent of the metaphysical idea of Truth, the «mimetic regime» is simply shifted onto the historical referent of social 'consent.' Pirandello's analysis, based on the contrast between Life and Truth, becomes – in Italy – the perfect mirror of the new modernist themes regarding the inability of assuming Reality in the symbolisms of the I. Michelstaedter's analysis of the same issues is meticulous but also critical, and he concludes that the crisis of the concept of Truth does not lead to the liberation of the Subject from the confines of metaphysical thought but forces it into the «mimetic regime» of a Truth that is, from time to time, the dominant ideology of a particular moment in history.

Keywords

Pirandello, Michelstaedter, Rhetoric, Modernism, Nihilism.

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we are still dominated by rhetoric [...]:
Rhetoric and imitation, after all, are one and the same.
Luigi Pirandello, *Un critico fantastico*

1.

Two books: *On Humor* (1908), by the future Nobel Prize winner Pirandello, and *Persuasion and Rhetoric* (1910), by the twenty-three-year-old Michelstaedter.¹ Two texts written at a time when the modernist cultural framework, years in development, was about to become hegemonic. Two authors who, better than others, understood the full significance of the cultural transformations under way – the crisis of the certainties of thought, of the self, of language (the crisis of the possibility of assuming reality in the symbolisms of the I). The crumbling of any possibility of a synthesis: the collapse of Values, having now declined into Concepts, equated to fictional models (the «will to Truth») on which to construct reality (think of Ernst Mach). Life as becoming (that same

¹ Written between 1909 and 1910, the text was to serve as Michelstaedter's B.A. thesis.

life put in the spotlight by Nietzsche,² already treacherously headed, with *Lebensphilosophie*,³ towards outcomes of felicitous eradication in the ‘nomadism’ of meaning); Life that opens to the collapse of *Grund* and contemplates itself as a flow refusing all reconciliation, all ‘forms’. From Bergson to Simmel, touching on William James,⁴ what becomes unbalanced, as Lukacs would have said after Hegel, is the relation between Life and Totality. This unbalance is that of a Subject, which, discovering itself to be an aggregation and not a unity, abdicates its role of giving meaning and organization to reality and, unable to establish itself at the apex of a hierarchy, admits to being a particular among particulars. The unachieved hierarchical connection of signs is part of a leveling of values that extends to all levels of existence: ‘organizations’ are now referred as the representational capacity of a subject that is purely particular, and thus demoted to the rank of forms. In coming into an unequal dialectic with a life that cannot be encompassed in any systematic point of view, forms are destined to be swept away every time, like arbitrary constructions directed at disastrous attempts of reconciliation. This is the realm of the Subjunctive, shortly to be introduced by Musil, where symbols are silent, semiosis is unlimited, and objects have no codes because they have no referents. This is the dawning of a new episteme (the Modernist one), founded, as Weininger would write having Mach in mind, on an empiricist epistemology aimed at displaying any unity as a metaphysical hypostatization, at grounding knowledge on psychological bases (but it is no coincidence that the study of psychology proceeds side by side with the atomization of society),⁵ shirking the task of creating an objectivity that might be other than the inevitably skeptical-destructive one of a subject that looks at the

² Cf. Mann: «after Nietzsche, ‘life’ has become the key concept of all modern world-views» (68). Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine.

³ What Mannheim would call the absolutization of «pure becoming»: «the emphasis on life and diversity, as the elements which cannot be comprehended by bureaucratic rationalization and generalization, anticipates a line of thought which consolidates itself into a single position of thinking, at first in opposition to centralism and subsequently in opposition to revolutionary natural law» (*Conservatism* 136).

⁴ It is the progressive loss, wrote Tönnies already in 1889, of the sense of community in the process of rationalization/specialization of Capitalism in its imperialist stage; equipollence of money resolved in the endless circularity of the exchange value, where the equivalence of signs (and therefore of interpretations) is redoubled by the equivalence of commodities: an internalized economic process that determines the individuality of the “citizen”, ideologizing the new sensitivity in a spectacularization of phenomena existing in themselves in an irreducible “difference”, phenomena that no longer belong to the dialectics of Being and Value. The esthete, the specialist, the Simmelian *blasé*, become the great symbols of this new condition, because they express its internal structure: in them, the differentiation of values is abolished by the new equivalence that reduces existence to the “art of living”, which, refusing the concentration of a symbol, cherishes an alienation that becomes the standard of an apparent rationality that eludes even the confrontation with signs. The possible defense that the Baudelairean *flâneur*, preserving his individuality, still managed to express, becomes (once the new production process is internalized) the preservation of a vital core, already alienated, that the new subject, also alienated, calls *Erlebnis*: psychological compensation, powerless but “autonomous” interiority, assumed and ideologized as a form of Time, that is, as the absence of form, which is also crisis of representation.

⁵ Not coincidentally, it was Nietzsche who had stressed to the highest degree, on the philosophical level, the importance of psychological research on unconscious motivations as a method of demystification. See Lukács’ pages on psychology in *Soul and Form*. Consider the desperate (and reactionary) attempt to restore the shattered *Kultur* (downplaying psychology and supporting philosophy) that is Otto Weininger’s *Sex and Character*.

world in the light of Proteus. A culture of fragmentation tending to emphasize, on the horizon of the Theory of Knowledge,⁶ the necessarily falsifying character of our symbolic constructions, exalting, by contrast, the domain of momentary impressions.⁷ A transitory mood, subject to time, aligns interchangeable impressions, recognizing in reality the mirror of its own non-recomposable inner fragmentation, unable to rise to the solidity of unity, of certainty, and, therefore, unable to redeem the world. The world, then, is left abandoned to its multicolor contingency, called Life:

Life is a continual flux which we try to stop, to fix in stable and determined forms, both inside and outside ourselves, because we are already fixed forms, forms which move in the midst of other immobile forms and which however can follow the flow of life until the movement, gradually slowing and becoming more and more rigid, eventually ceases. The forms in which we seek to stop, to fix in ourselves this constant flux are the concepts, [...] all the fictions we create for ourselves [...]. But within ourselves, in what we call the soul and is the life in us, the flux continues, indistinct under the barriers [...]. In certain moments of turmoil all these fictitious forms are hit by the flux and collapse miserably. (*On Humor* 137)

But is it really this contrast between Modernism and Metaphysics (between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur*; between epistemology and ethics; between Life and Form; between Becoming and Being) that is at stake? If the battle of Modernism is a struggle for liberation from the conceptual schemes of a forced objectivity, then why doesn't Wittgenstein, for example, attack the new horizon of thought for being destructive, instead of creating structures that are increasingly rigid? Perhaps the answer can be found in the two different ways in which Pirandello and Michelstaedter relate the new cultural horizon to the classical concept of Rhetoric. This answer is, among many other things, the story of a betrayal.

2.

During an interview given in October 1936 Pirandello surprisingly associated three names – Nietzsche, Weininger, and Michelstaedter – suggesting that all three had been «broken» by attempting to keep «form» and «substance» together. Michelstaedter is placed between the main accuser of Platonism, intended as the creation of the 'unreal' world of the *ontos on*, and the greatest interpreter of the tragic attempt to reactivate that world in the new horizon of temporality: the great interpreter, that is to say, of the neo-Kantian version of the Platonic perspective. For Pirandello, the defender of Life against forms, all three authors were basically 'seekers of the Absolute', psychologically dominated by Stirnerian «fixed ideas» and therefore destined to succumb to a reality that allows no reconciliation at all. As with Pirandello, critics have often associated

⁶ Cf. Lukács: «an attempt to remain in the non-essential [...]. So now there is only a sad vegetating (and mulling over the theory of knowledge) [...]. I have taken refuge in the theory of knowledge and in frivolity» (*Diario* 53-67).

⁷ Cf. Lukács: «There was nothing solid in it and nothing permanent [...]. Everything turned into mood [...]. Even the sovereign of ego [...] dissolved itself into fluid moments. The ego flooded into the world and – aided by its moods – absorbed it. But precisely for this reason the world also invaded the ego, and there was nothing that could have drawn the boundary line between them. [...] and the loss of facts meant the loss of values» («The Parting of the Ways», in *The Lukács Reader* 168-69).

Michelstaedter to one or the other of these two approaches: he has been interpreted as a neo-Kantian countless times⁸ and the interpretations of his poetics in the perspective of a relativism/nihilism pioneering the 'difference' and refuting the unitary myths of bourgeois metaphysics are equally numerous, similar, in this, to the analysis contesting the social system allegedly emerging from the Pirandellian 'negative' as a critique of classical rationality which – it alone! – would have represented the bourgeoisie.⁹ However, even though Pirandello and Michelstaedter best understood the epistemological issues of their time, it does not follow that they were on the same level. Pirandello posits the crisis on an ideological level: he looks at this phenomenon as if (Marx might say) reality had passed from books to history, as if the changes in reality had been caused by the epistemological revolution instead of the contrary, and in that revolution he tries to resolve (to rationalize) the question of the inauthenticity of life. In other words, he tries to resolve the crisis of the symbolic as symbolizing its own absence. Michelstaedter, instead, rejects this theoretical/epistemological approach and, seeing this as an integral part of the problem, makes it the object of a thorough evaluation by placing it in a doubly determined relationship with society. *Persuasion and Rhetoric* has caused so many difficulties to critics because the two variegated sides of the issue – the Scylla and Charybdis of pluralism and form (of epistemology and ethics) – are both charged with being abstractions. These mystifying forms of *Erlebnis* are viewed as tending to conceal and perpetuate the theoretical approach which, in both cases, is a 'second Nature' of reality, overlapping it and determining in thought (in theory) the space of disalienation: «Reality is justly said combined: “subordinate”, because in the reality of the Subject there are now “things” and *thought* which, with its many connections, dominates them» (Michelstaedter, *Appendice I* 138).

Michelstaedter realizes that the crisis of classical rationality (its inability to posit itself as Nature, which the nihilist horizon now actually reveals) is reflected as the capacity for concealment of nature-based thought, both in the ideologies willing to leave behind the fetish of Being (Impressionism, Pragmatism, Relativism, Contingentism, etc.), and in religion-based or ethics-based ideologies. As we shall see, these ideologies end up being part of a structure in which Being is relativized and experienced as social being, reified in 'theory' as the Truth of the ideological moment that society expresses and enacts as consent. The binomial pairs of bourgeois thought (Life/Form; *Kultur/Zivilisation*) are here broken apart. Michelstaedter sees them working in unison because he realizes that the horizon of specialization (the loss of the vision of totality that leaves reality in pieces, making it impossible to put together the different viewpoints of increasingly atomized human beings) and the horizon of rationalization (the systemic need to recompose these viewpoints in an increasingly predictable and computable mechanized abstraction) work together. In other words, what was once established as a social foundation in the form of an absolute law of nature, now aims to preserve both its character of absoluteness *and* its temporal character. The nature of Becoming (from

⁸ Beginning with Giovanni Amendola: «The gold vein has surfaced once again. [...] He has felt and communicated the need to be serious and earnest. [...] [...] An ethical and conscious ego» (167-169).

⁹ To mention an example that clearly expresses the matter, cf. Intermite: «the real revolution brought on by Michelstaedter and the reason why we can say that he truly succeeded in breaking free from the bourgeois perspective that was tying down almost all his contemporaries (except Pirandello, and perhaps him alone), consists in his overcoming the narrow-mindedness of the political field and his resolving a political problem through a revolution in the field of morality» (113-114).

which it arose against the immobile Nature of feudal reality: its historical nature that continually allows it to restructure itself in times of crisis), and the immobile nature that now defends it against the transformative capacity of history itself. As in Marx's «betrayal of the bourgeoisie», Reason turns into instrumental reason; Science presents itself as the horizon of Truth — but a truth now susceptible to change; the principle of «competition» which continues to be affirmed in theory while monopolies are being formed everywhere; the social and legal status of a citizen, totally extraneous to his actual life conditions.

Confronted by the transformation of Substance into function/fiction, Michelstaedter not only rejects the cynical opportunity to use that function 'as if' it were a Substance, but also identifies, in the thinking aimed at reconstructing, in theory, the old idea of Substance, a mechanism designed to introduce, against the shifting and uncertain backdrop of temporality, Being as abstraction. This abstraction is the cement of a social cohesion that only in this alienated perspective can be expressed and perpetuated as such, imprinting itself in the hearts of men:

abstracted from *necessity*, the laws will make their proclamations through calculation; men, from their own necessities, will conform *by calculation* to the organized system of necessities [...]. In [...] the diminished life determined by abstraction lies the condition for the existence of the system of abstractions [...]. Without this, the system could never work *right* – but once it does work right, it too will be *right*. (Michelstaedter, *Appendice II* 157-58)

The difference between the two authors is emblematically expressed in their different analyses of the idea of Rhetoric. At the center of his essay, Pirandello places immobility, (the abstract set of rhetorical norms underlying the old art forms. Immobility, the fetish of the 'given' that passes itself off as reality and behind which the humoristic perspective aims to identify another form of reality which instead changes and evolves, and which the new art has the task of representing:

Art, like all ideal or illusory constructions, also tend to fix life; [...] the statue in a gesture, the landscape in a temporary immutable perspective. But – what about the perpetual mobility of successive perspectives? What about the constant flow in which souls are? Art generally abstracts and concentrates [...]. Now it seems to the humorist that all this over-simplifies nature and tends to make life too [...] coherent. (*On Humor* 142)

This mobility is of course not limited to artistic expression, but proceeds on the existential level in the dialectic between the antithetic conflicting principles of life and form,¹⁰ materializing in the usual images of the flow (of Life) and the inauthentic arrest (of forms). This dialectic is expressed in a sequence consisting of, broadly speaking, four stages: the criticism of the associated concepts of Tradition and Rhetoric; the valorization of the rights of the particular; the recognition of the fictionality of all purpose¹¹; and the consequential leveling of values of all form/interpretations, where «it

¹⁰ Where life, following Simmel, can be realized only in the forms that are its antithesis.

¹¹ The vision of a man who, half ironic and half compassionate, manages to stay «cool and calm» in the storm; a man impervious to all change; a man who at the same time reflects the collapse of the traditional humanist paradigm and the 'plastic' discourse justifying the new *modus pensandi*. Cf. Pirandello: «From uncertainty of thought comes uncertainty of action» (*L'umorismo e altri saggi* 243).

will be worth as much as something thought to be real, since in the final analysis neither one nor the other will bring any satisfaction» (*On Humor* 124).

Yet one can see that *L'umorismo* is based on a contradiction: the transition from the historical evolution of humor to its final transformation into an ahistorical element, an anthropological component of human existence: «We needn't look too far back to find humanity of our past for it is still within us, the same as always. At most, we can admit that, due to the alleged development of sensibility and progress of civilization, those disposition of the mind and those conditions of life which are particularly conducive to humor [...] are more common». (*On Humor* 15-16)

Humor —«the feeling of the opposite», the ability to always see the other sense of things, the ability not to settle down in generalizing propositions or systems — says Pirandello, has *always* existed. But its centuries-old existence does not cancel out the historical ability that is expressed in change and transformation. Compared to the past, people have become more apt to understand humor, meaning that human nature can change: thus, it does not appear to be ontologically, but historically, determined.

Here begins the long, historical critique that Pirandello raises against the associated concepts of tradition and rhetoric, by which he means the formalization of an art having external significance elaborated on abstract and apparently immutable aesthetic concepts: «Whenever a rebel poet gave the filing cabinet a well-aimed kick and created a new form of his own, the rhetoricians would growl at him for quite a while. Eventually, however, if the new form succeeded in obtaining recognition, they would take it, disassemble, it like a little machine, give it a logical formulation and catalogue it, perhaps by adding a new box to the file» (*On Humor* 30).

Pirandello's criticism is against the abstract formal generalizations that claim to swallow up dissonant particulars. In other words, his criticism is an attack against an art of classicist aesthetic values. It matters little that Pirandello includes the Romantics among the accused, because to him the problem arises with the canonization of Romantic works of art. In other words, he accuses them when they become imitative models, as such reactivating the same motive purported by classicist aesthetics: «Rhetoric not only permitted but recommended imitating any model that it considered classic. And imitation was a quality and an honor for any writer, a certification [...] of devoted obedience to schooling, to the precepts of beauty, indeed, of the *beautiful*, the *good*, the *true*» (*L'umorismo e altri saggi* 170).

Pirandello's attack against imitation is an attack against abstract generalizations masquerading as immutable Truths. In this sense his attack originates from a historicist consciousness, meaning the historical consciousness of the changing of mankind, and thus of its categories of judgment, over time. If Rhetoric represented «an older and essentially precapitalist mode of linguistic organization; [...] serv[ing] as a means of assimilating the speech of individuals to some suprapersonal oratorical paradigm» (Jameson: *Ideologies of Theory* 127), humor – by implicitly referring to a different social model – disrupts this imitative phenomenon. This is due to how it uses the tool of reflection, «the pool of icy water in which the flame of feeling dies out», meaning the critical, subjective, discordant element: «The disorganization, the digressions [...] are precisely the necessary and inevitable consequences of the disturbance and disruption which are produced in the organizing movement of the images through the work of the active reflection» (*On Humor* 119).

While in traditional works of art reflection 'enjoys' the organization of ideas and images in a harmonious form, in humorous works of art, reflection «is not hidden [...];

rather, it places itself squarely before the feeling, in a judging attitude, and, detaching itself from it, analyzes it and disassembles its imagery» (*On Humor* 113).

It is precisely at this point that the concept passes from art to life, pointing out that not only works of art, but all our ideal constructions, even the ones we make in everyday life, are conceptualizing abstractions: «Our knowledge of the world and of ourselves totally lacks the objective value [...]. This objective value of reality is continuous illusory fabrication» (*On Humor* 132).

In other words, the condition of the humorous artist assumes an existential character: «a man in which a thought cannot originate without the opposite or contrary thought originating at the same time, and who finds that for each reason he has to say yes, there arise one or more that compel him to say *no*» (*On Humor* 124).

Challenging the imitative abilities of traditional art leads to viewing humorous art as a construct that mimics the flow of life, and then to an existentialist view that, exalting this flow, aims to preserve mankind from the pain produced by the discovery of the illusoriness of its ideal creations. This awareness is a consciousness that declares that Nature is horrible only because of the fragile constructions of civilization and reason that mankind attempts to oppose it:

Tomorrow a humorist could picture Prometheus on the Caucasus in the act of pondering sadly his lit torch and perceiving in it, at last, the fateful cause of his infinite torment. He has finally realized that Jupiter is no more that a vain phantasm [...], the shadow of his own body projecting itself as a giant in the sky, precisely because of the lighted torch he holds in his hand. Jupiter could disappear only on one condition, on condition that Prometheus extinguish his candle, that is, his torch. [...] the shadow remains, terrifying and tyrannical, for all men who fail to realize the fateful deception. (*On Humor* 141)

We are dealing with an ontologization of the crisis, transferred onto the image of a primordial Chaos (before the «torch») that now becomes the Origin to retrieve by preserving contradictions in their juxtaposition, recoverable by denouncing all reason capable of mortifying the flow of life in well-defined constructions. The rights of the particular are changing in a view from above that aims at the surrender of ataraxia. This is a “classic” view that finally creates a bridge between Nature and Time and eternalizes both outside of change, except, of course, the change eternalized in the flow: «Conclude! Of all the pressing needs that afflict humanity, this one is no doubt the saddest and the most vain. [...] Because nature, in its eternity, does not conclude. And [...] when the time comes to return and lose ourselves in its eternity, [we] recognize as vain, illusory, arbitrary all our conclusions» (“Non conclude”, Mazzacurati 358).

In a desperate attempt of defense, the intellectual changes his opinion on the *Krisis* and establishes the innocence (and authenticity) of Becoming. He tears away the encrustations of his bourgeois common sense and gives back to the class to which he belongs a perfected ideology, in which the flow that Nature represents, judges and destroys historical forms by relating them to its own eternity.¹² This is the same as saying that the historical consciousness of the changing of ideas in time is becoming the

¹² We are looking at a typical attitude of bourgeois thought, which Roland Barthes indicated with the term «naturalité» in *Mythologies*. It should be understood, however, that this concept is not necessarily reactionary, but must be considered in relation to the various historical contexts, and I am using it here only as one of the ideological expressions of the imperialist stage of Capitalism (and therefore of Modernism).

epistemological consciousness of an ungovernable movement declaring an unbridgeable gap between man and existence, precisely what *L'umorismo* is about: «Man [...] by abstracting ideas from emotions, tends precisely to fix what is changeable and fluid. It tends to give an absolute value to what is relative, and thus it aggravates an ill» (*On Humor* 140).

The consciousness of historical change, as expressed in the first part of the essay, establishes the 'change'. Then, through Pirandello's 'reflection', it becomes an ontological consciousness that ultimately excludes History itself, making it too one of those «ideal constructions» to be viewed with skepticism: «The humorist [...] knows what a legend is and how it is created, what history is and how it is made: they are all compositions, more or less ideal [...]. The humorist amuses himself by disassembling these compositions» (*On Humor* 143).

Here, in equating history to legend, a nodal point in the *Krisis* of the early twentieth century emerges. Yet the problem, which should have been noted by the critics who in recent years have naively praised the multiplicity in Pirandello, is that those demystifying consequences that could dismantle the equally naive pretensions of rational logic and realism, were eventually recomposed in a formal, ontologically significant scheme equating reality (and Truth) with the flow of life, preserving the authenticity of the subject with his attempt to identify. In short, after exposing the hypocrisies of the modern bourgeois subject, namely the logic of his mental constructs, *L'umorismo* ends up perfecting that very logic, compensating the damage caused by History in a new ideological vision that replaces History with Becoming and Historicity with Theory of Knowledge.¹³ The negative horizon therefore remains affirmative, and the historical problem of contradictions in a... historical moment, is resolved in metaphysical terms. This is because inauthenticity is here hypostatized as an authentic component of life: it dreams of being authentic. In Pirandello the conflict is resolved with its ontologization. As such, it ceases to be conflicting, if not in the inefficiency of an epistemological judgment (life vs forms) which, however, is the final recomposition (rationalization) of the process through which the isolated individual reinsures his unstable point of view.

This instability is obviously the sign of a historical condition. However, when the mechanism obligates equating history with legend, i.e. ideology, this horizon becomes unsurpassable, showing that nihilistic negation «can produce the same paralyzing effect of the illusions of progressivism» (Mazzacurati 77), and makes use of relativism precisely in order to mask its ideology, proclaiming the impossibility of meaning, which becomes the equality of all meanings. Meaning is transformed into simulation, and humor is the weapon that can break it apart, to the point of suggesting the relativization of every value as redemption, in a multiplicity that seems no longer capable of being resolved but that reveals its own background in the theoretical discourse on itself. What appears to be the abandonment of the world to the anarchy of particulars is actually, in the recomposed image of a natural flow, the resumption of an epistemological judgment. This judgment, with History being deleted, claims to be universal, directing its verdict at anything that refuses to acquire the disaggregating characters of that very flow. The movement originating from historicist consciousness is converted here into a new 'natural law' directed at making disenchantment not a tool for critical analysis, but the custodian of an

¹³ Significantly, in the *Preface to Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello makes his noted distinction between «historical» writers and «philosophical» writers, the latter being interested not so much in the story as in its universal meaning.

immobility that exalts movement. By this, I mean, that the law is directed at establishing conflict as a biological element, where contradiction becomes an inalienable element of reality. Here, then, we find a general discourse that again reifies human activity ahistorically, objectifying it on the level of a total contradiction, on the level of an anthropological antinomy. At the same time, the new existential situation becomes the space of personal freedom, the space of a subject that, rejecting the purported 'cage' of Being, turns alienation into independence and mystifies (misrepresents) the social structure of Dominion as the dominion of the metaphysical Concept.

3.

Michelstaedter understands the betrayal because what he calls Rhetoric is not a set of timeless rules to be strictly obeyed, but a set of rules that can change over time while always presenting themselves as Truth. This is not simply a matter of considering every conceptual concretion (God, Law, I, Word, Thing) in terms of a bundle of sensations pre-directed by the subjectivity of an individual. It is also necessary to determine the instrumental use of these symbolic crystallizations as an economic function that synthetically organizes the material of experience. This economic function reconstructs a stable model based on a convention that is both anti-metaphysical and instrumentally rational, subject to constantly changing interpretative paradigms but always necessarily experienced in them as substance. Abstracting these elements out of the flow for practical/pragmatist purposes is the space of a cultural hegemony that spreads with surprising speed because it is directly related – organic – to the new modes of technical progresses. These new modes, in turn, are rooted in the restructured production system, in the combined action of specialization and rationalization.

Thought can still imply a theoretical reconciliation giving to a reality multiplied in entities (not unified by a higher principle) the abstract form of objectivity. This reification, which is interpreted by Pirandello as the persistence of symbolic-metaphysical thought, is actually the cancellation, on the level of thought, of the mechanism from which the objectivity originates (metaphysics 'forgetting itself' in Technology). That is to say it is the cancellation of the mechanism which the social structure expresses, at the ideological level achieved, as knowledge. The time of the «death of God», Michelstaedter realizes, is the time of an inhuman objectivity, not because God is not yet completely dead in the hearts of men, but because the rationality of the new technological horizon (and what it determines!) takes its place as an abstraction. This rationality encloses in itself the characteristics of Becoming and Being, and radiates them as ideology, assigning its own features to everything that wanting to live takes part in this mimetic nightmare: «that which in every case and every manner is called life—is the infinitely various conjoining of *potency* finitely localized in infinitely various aspects—as consciousness, according to which in every case its correlate is stable amid the instability» (*Persuasion* 16). The horizon of technology assumes, we might say, both the features of ought-to-be and the features of ought-to-become. This is because in the space of knowledge both are perceived as the place of a conciliatory substantialization, which, however, is no more than the point where society projects itself as the place of Being beyond its contradictions, beyond relativistic chance. This, as we shall see, is the very foundation of

that abstract Being (specialization and rationalization¹⁴): «everyone adapt themselves to the sufficiency of that abstraction of life [...], *imitating* [...], learning to repeat the obscure actions they see performed by others» (*Appendice II* 152).

The acceptance of «the perpetual flow of things» (48), which the antagonist will express in the *Dialogo della salute*, will actually be for Michelstaedter the point where life will be forced to ask to consist in the reification of an alienated social foundation. This, from single individuals, will seek its objectivity in the *Gestell*, thereby continuing to support as rational the regime of relative, but in the form of an immobility immortalized in the image of movement.

Michelstaedter understands that this epistemological destructuring requires doubling the empirical instance in the universal and abstract form of *theorein*, a form that society can convey both in the aspects of Becoming (the delight of the flow, etc.) and in the ethical aspects of ought-to-be, which become the forms in which society itself is expressed in the sphere of knowledge (art, philosophy, etc.). Any theoretical reconciliation reproduces the fictitious conjunction between particular and universal, the rationalization of the subject's determinate will.

It is then not a matter of choosing between Nietzsche or Weininger: Michelstaedter realizes that both perspectives can work only if put together. The world of social disruption, the system of correlativity that atomizes individuals into desiring mechanisms and keeps them in constant conditions of accidentality, is a cosmos of disintegration and violence (as the will that has to satisfy a need can obviously clash with the will of another). Yet the unrealized organic connection of individual consciousness with collective consciousness (*Kultur*) cannot lead to the absence of social systematicity, but only to an instrumental systematicity that is the sum of partial mechanisms. These mechanisms are directed, through theory (through the separation of life and knowledge) to a forced unification¹⁵ that at the same time mystifies social morality as individual morality and presents the relativity of individuals as an abstract form of quiet, as a categorization of Being. Therefore, it is the System itself (the System that relativism attacks as separate from reality) that becomes the expression of relativism, the relativism of individual necessities that are abstracted, socially, in the words with which society elevates them to universal values (morality, freedom, art, etc.). These values are crystallized not as forms of metaphysical thought, which must be destroyed by Life, but as reified thought drawing its forms from that same relativized life – life alienated by the pattern of will/need of individuals that are both isolated and interrelated as one another's instruments. This model of reality, however, will still be the reality created by need expressed by single individuals, but now, abstracted in the forms of thought (fictitiously separated from the contingency of life), it will be experienced as value. This,

¹⁴ Cf. Lukács: «rationalisation is unthinkable without specialisation. The finished article ceases to be the object of the work-process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalized special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other. [...] The unity of a product as a *commodity* no longer coincides with its unity as a use-value» (*History and Class* 88-89).

¹⁵ Cf. Lukács: «in the incoherence of the system in fact. This incoherence becomes particularly egregious in periods of crisis. [...] adventitious connection with each other is suddenly forced into the consciousness of everyone. [...] yet it can experience a sudden dislocation because the bonds uniting its various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal» (*History and Class* 101).

then, is not about Becoming overwhelming the Machian «conceptual monsters» of objectivity: objectivity is monstrous because it contains the becoming within itself, because it is the abstraction of becoming.

Society, which functions not as an organic whole but as an aggregate of partial desiring systems, is clearly unable to shield these systems from the unceasing blows of chance. Therefore, these systems are constantly undergoing a violation of the ontological form of their existence: «Just as every individual existence means the negation of all the rest, so every thought of the individual exists only insofar as it negates the thoughts of others [...], killing for its own benefit the life of other centers (inasmuch as they are centers)» (*Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 197). The violence that can be produced by the conflict between these relative systems must then be subsumed in a perfectible cultural code – rhetoric, in its various forms – in which the will can always be found as an abstract, socialized form of itself. Rhetoric

requires taking into account the contingent [...] interest of the matter: the interest it has for the subject being addressed by the speaker. [...] it does not ask that accidental subject the profound universal essence of the matter but wants to put the issue in a favorable light before whatever moral or material criterion is prevalent in the subject. [...] it is the science of ordering the representation of the state of things so as to be able to apply to them the terms of a formula that already exists in the code (or mentality, or system of interests) to which the speaker is appealing – [...] is the certain knowledge of the conditions of the moment, the perfect knowledge of the subject and of what has value for him. (*Scritti scolastici* 189-91)

The capacity of rhetoric becomes the ability to penetrate into the rift that has opened in the relationship between truth and subject, and to tie down the contingency that the subject expresses as will and lives as a value, to what the speaker finds in his code, a code that has already categorized the truth in abstract entities, in the abstract orders of knowledge: in the characteristic modes of relativity expressed as abstraction. Rhetoric has the task of organizing that will in the environment so that the subject may identify in the modes of rhetoric, in its categorization of reality, the form most suitable for his continuation/satisfaction. Rhetoric organizes becoming and calls it Being: through knowledge (language, science, philosophy) an individual who lives the correlativity of contingency is reflected in the security allowed by the categorization of contingency: «[He] finds all he needs in an established form, he believes that he knows life when he has learned the norms of this form and obtains without danger what he needs» (*Sfugge la vita* 158). The ontological fragmentation of a Being that, according to the well-known definition of Aristotelian *Metaphysics*, is expressed in a manifold way, becomes the fulcrum whence Michelstaedter proceeds to analyze the assumption of modernist subjectivation. To begin with, what the will of the individual expresses in its relationship with an object is the momentary (hence fictitious) attribution of value which he, in the very act of willing, believes can be definitely determined. The will expresses the theoretical point of view of specialization: «The world of each is *the* world; and that world's value is the correlative of its *valency* [...]. His *certain end*, his *reason for being*, the *sense* that each act has for him, again are nothing but his self-continuation» (*Persuasion* 23).

What the will expresses in the inauthentic structures of «time» and «relationship» becomes, for the subject, what is just, because this is all the subject sees and is the source of his illusory consisting: he considers as a whole the limited space that his will illuminates. A different subject, equally prey to this specializing vision, will do the same:

for all of subjects, reality, considered under this form, becomes a set of usable things, a set of objects (things) to attach to their perception in order to satisfy their need and thereby ontologically consist.¹⁶ «But the others want to talk and not listen, and so they all slaughter and contradict each other» (in *Dialogo della salute e altri dialoghi* 55): the system of correlative flowing is not the expression of a relational *eros*, but the *neikos* of a continuous attempted transgression driven by need/will, whereby everyone, necessitating what to each is useful, affirms himself with violence, reifying reality. This system, in order to prevent the otherwise inevitable explosion of social violence, needs to be rationalized into abstract (and hegemonic) forms so that the subject may find in these forms the satisfaction of his needs. The creation of ideological products conceived on the grounds of selfish need, is accompanied by an abstract counterpart (more and more homogeneous) that finds expression as a Being that is extraneous to them, to which individuals refer in order to conceal their contingent condition. Men relate harmonically to each other (while actually remaining polarized) only through reference to this abstraction consisting in knowledge.

The creation of objectified structures around the subject allows him to limit his capacity for foresight to the increasingly defined (calculistic) schemes that those structures require as adaptation. What Michelstaedter calls the «loss of vitality» is precisely the transition of man, faced with a system by which he is dominated, into a contemplative dimension:

The more and individual adapts to circumstantial contingencies, that much less is it *his* sufficiency [...]. Within the social individual, absolute social security corresponds to a foresight that is reduced to the instant and point such that, at every new insufficient contingency, the individual would perish wretchedly if he were removed from the bosom of society. (*Persuasion* 120-21)

The epistemological crisis is seen not as a disruptive mechanism (contingency is followed by morality, not by disruption! The modernist crisis is linked to what rationalizes it and referred back to the social structure), but as a structure capable of creating 'elements' that are more rigid, with which the subject confirms himself:

Rhetoric is thus the register of what men mostly say they want, [...] and then of the declarations that are most repeated [...]: all the fragments of life, the materiality of relationships, progressively ordered according to this or that word (good, evil, virtue, etc.) like the colored pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope. But in reality they are the remains of the wreckage of philosophy. (*Appendice VI* 298-99)

Michelstaedter understands the Nietzschean argument of the theoretical doubling of reality (the real world and the apparent world), but he rejects both the *Erlebnis* of the eternal flow and the narrowing down of the concept of value in the horizon of subjectivity. To Michelstaedter, both are connected, on the one hand, to the subject's material life which in the correlative is expressed as a constant lack of self and, on the other, to the subject's will to continue to feign in that ontological consistency the road that leads him to alienate himself in objectified structures. This is the process that leads man to separate life from himself, classifying the external world (in which he recognizes

¹⁶ In this sense, any relationship between men becomes a relationship between things.

an ontological self) in the forms of «instrumental reason». Just as Aristotle predicates the absolute in the forms of the relative,¹⁷ so does Greek philosophy (the field of study of Michelstaedter' dissertation) become the battleground for a very contemporary ideological clash played out on the ability to resist the forms of abstraction. Michelstaedter emphasizes the authentic side of existence: not the dream of the *Kultur* that comes before disintegration, but the ability, in recognizing one's deficiency, to recognize also the origin of the injustice that the individual will expresses as need (specialization) and organizes in abstract forms (rationalization). The individual expresses the need to persist on the road of deficiency that negates the possibility of a false persuasion that is a falsely rational abstraction of irrationality: the knowledge that joins together individual determinate wills. Because (as realized by Aristotle, who adapts his «goods» to whatever is most in vogue) «the criterion is consent» (*Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 199). It is the consent of society that forces the subject to adapt to the irrational forms of his will: «Men talk to affirm themselves, but because they talk they depend on whoever is listening» (*Dialogo della salute e altri scritti* 204).

Men want to establish a positive relationship between the Being and the world in order to continue in the alleged sufficiency. Since that relationship is always subjected to the irrationality of the *neikos* that can show it as an illusion, it must now be predicated in the world of *doxa*, and the more it will be protected against the risk of unmasking, the more it is in tune with current beliefs and common sense. The task of knowledge then will be to elevate this common sense to itself:

They no longer hear the voice of things telling them, «You are», and amidst the obscurity they do not have the *courage* to endure, but each seeks his companion's hand [...] and together they repeat, «we are, we are, because we know, because we can tell each other the words of knowledge [...]». *Thus do they stupefy one another* [...]. *Thus rhetoric flourishes alongside life.* (*Persuasion* 68-9)

The issue is to proclaim as True whatever is more common, because whatever is more common, being believed by the majority, is what best protects all of society from the irrupting of contingency that would undermine its structure: not actually removing contingency from life, but shrouding it with the categories of being that contain the finite. This is still the voice of need expressed as will, but will is now in unison, through knowledge, with the will of society as a whole, because the common reaction to the reality expressed by the will is separated from the vital interest of the subject and, based on the common historical result of the senses and of morality (convention, adaptation), is called truth: «he starts building reality facing backwards towards the relativity from which it came. [...] positive system of relativity» (*Il prediletto punto* 152-53).

This separation is not remedied in the endless activity that speaks to men about the lack of Being, but in the systematic overlapping of Universal and Particular which the multiplicity brings to unity in the modes of categories.¹⁸ The fragments of irrational life

¹⁷«All the people ran to take from him the *goods* that *came from the absolute*. He was a practical spirit and took the goods that were most in fashion, and which lent themselves to the eye, needs, and taste of the public [...]. And the public was happy to be able to say *the goods came from the sky and to use them just as if they'd been goods of this earth*» (Michelstaedter: *Persuasion* 83-84).

¹⁸ Cf. Michelstaedter: «In this mirror of relativity he contemplates his motionless figure» (*L'anima ignuda* 61).

are abstracted; entity implies non-entity, and thought, now far from the horror of 'flowing' that the life of the individual determines in the *neikos*, surreptitiously appropriates being:

His raison d'être are his material needs, and it is only out of self-interest that he satisfies them in the life imposed by the city. [...] once the principle of violence affirming the need to continue is accepted as just, every affirmation is just for every need. [...] he shall be wise and just and free [...], because he will be 'said' by a free and just and wise city [...]. The city isolates individual needs. [...] everyone must take their 'any' dark and unchanging duty as sufficient life; adapt to being a material part of the organism [...]. Thrown out the door, violence comes in through the window and spreads everywhere [...]. The word of Platonic education in the Republic is mimesis. (Appendice II 144-49)

The unlimited concepts, the unlimited symbolic forms that men produce, will then gradually fall in line with the «finite science of the infinite relations between things» (*Appendice II* 174). The criterion is consent! Based on these principles (virtues) made concrete in the «they say» (in the voice of the majority), Aristotle begins to predicate Being and gives new meaning to the concept of philosophy. Through the work of theory he silences his insufficiency and places the norm not in himself but in the many theories of life that attach an end to the rule which is a sum of ends. This catalog (science) allows for filing of Good as something attainable and opens the door to the method for achieving it: knowledge and morality (epistemology and ethics are playing the same game because even the ought-to-be becomes an operation hinging the will and conflicting needs¹⁹). But the things in the catalog are still the irrational reality of needs. The way to arrive at what is most true (useful) will then be the method of power, which considers the more common beliefs real and classifies them according to principles (virtues). However, these principles are the beliefs themselves: considering «a rational substance the schemes of causality» (*Scritti vari* 861). Michelstaedter identifies the connection between the development of ideologies (epistemology, ethics, etc.) and the form achieved by the social system, and determines how that system reintegrates (reconciles), epistemologically and socially, the development of those ideological determinations by adapting them to itself. The function of society is to be «the workshop of *absolute values*» (*Persuasion* 144): society elaborates into theories the objectivity outside the deficient totality that the subject represents, and places his values (his needs) in a system of statistics, the most common of which (the most useful) will be from time to time labeled the ultimate values. It is to these ultimate values that men, in order to continue, will be required to refer in the manners of a relationship to a hegemonic knowledge.

It is not, therefore, a demystification based on skeptical/relativist grounds: the discourse of knowledge (especially of technical knowledge, which is stronger because it is better suited for the immediate satisfaction of human needs and the transformation of reality for the purpose of this satisfaction²⁰) is fictitious precisely because it wants to

¹⁹ Cf. Michelstaedter: "Riflessione su temi buddisti", in *Il prediletto punto* 118: «But if they are well organized in their situations, they never find themselves forced to compromise; indeed, they are quick to acknowledge that those ways, given their position, are the most favorable to life. In short, they will have a code of things that are useful or harmful to their position, and they will call them good or bad. They will make an ethics out of them».

²⁰ And therefore obligates the other knowledges to work like itself if they want to survive: it hegemonizes them. Cf. Michelstaedter: «in his polemic with Protagoras, Aristotle must contend with

exclude, by not referring to the totality which the subject expresses as deficiency, the possibility of overcoming the historical horizon of nihilism expressed in the correlativity of individual needs.

It is a connection between Science/Contingency/Common Sense that is being established here: science is characterized as the accumulation of likely truths (the same mechanism at play regarding the beliefs of subjects) that excludes the 'deficiency' of the ontological giving, in place of that, schemes of abstract signs that feign (more and more perfectly) the regularity of the correlative system, more and more perfectly orienting toward the same purpose the beliefs of men. Men will thus have the impression of a decline in social frictions because they will calculistically adapt to those abstractions for the sake of their necessities, which however will more and more become the necessities of all of society (Good and Evil).

Rhetoric is then the technique through which the speaker mimetically adapts to what the audience is more willing to hear.²¹ The rhetorician seeks to negate the other's will if it strays from the modes expressed by social being. This is why, with the progress of the rhetorical system, the speaker's work becomes easier, as his intentions and those of his listeners tend to converge. The work of the rhetorician becomes easier because it refers to a common *Kultur*, to a horizon of shared values; however, these are not the neo-Kantian dream of a lost social organicity, but rather the dominant ideological horizon, which changes in time while always presenting itself as a timeless horizon of values: the betrayal of the bourgeoisie.

The criterion is consent. Rhetoric is a technique of power that dissolves disagreements with reference to the apparent logic of the 'second nature' which, defined as Truth, preventively determines the directions of knowledge and action. As Giorgio Brianese remarked, rhetoric is not the technique that cancels out violence through dialogue (Chaim Perelman's «new rhetoric», akin to the humorous discourse of Pirandello), that promotes agreement without suppressing pluralism,²² because rhetoric preserves a power situation but it conceals it by referring to what is already irrationally given: «drawing the lines close to the appearance of facts» (*Appendice VI* 288). Since the conditions for the prevailing of one discourse over another always depend on external factors, common sense becomes the point of truth itself. Recalling an illuminating statement by Jameson on the transformation of rhetoric into style as an element of the

the principle that "man is the measure of all things", and to skepticism [...] he responds that in practice no skeptic would seriously doubt the reality of a danger threatening him, of an interest that determines him to take action; yet he fails to realize that he is using as an absolute term of comparison the relative measure given by the determinations of man, by what is necessary to his life» (*Scritti vari* 689).

²¹ Cf. Michelstaedter: «Rhetorics in general have reduced the infinite variety of individuals that a speaker can address to a single scheme for which they have determined the laws of motion of passions, etc. [...]. When a man wants from another, or from a group of other men, an act, [...] he will immediately employ the means that the nature of the audience and of its connection with the thing in question [offer him], and completely neglect to examine the real nature of the thing» (*L'anima ignuda* 38-41).

²² But at this point it should be clear that this pluralism (this tolerance, this dialogue) underlies from the start a hegemonic horizon that will determine its own direction (and end result). It reproduces a 'calculistic value' (whatever is useful!) even though, in its will to affirm itself with no 'absolute truth' (just like modern science), it claims it can do without it. Even the kind of knowledge that settles for probability comes under the same dynamic.

atomization of society in the contemporary middle-class world,²³ we may say that the style that has branched off from rhetoric (remember that *L'umorismo* arises precisely in opposition to the concept of imitation represented by rhetoric) wants to go back, surreptitiously, to being rhetoric, even as it continues to consider itself 'style'. The subject who expresses his will, must, in order to ensure it, situate it within the broader structures of a society which, however, is no longer the myth of the organic community that classical rhetoric suggested, but merely the ideological illusion that it feigns as a second nature, reiterating the fictitious union between Universal and Particular (truth and relativity; instrumental cohesion and atomization) which is the point on which bourgeois society ideologically stands.

Rhetoric is the fictitious form of the 'sufficiency' that an individual, historically, is faced with – «do not adapt yourself to the sufficiency of what is given to you» (*Persuasion* 73). And there is no stopping. Rhetoric changes over time, assigning the criterion of objectivity to the each-time givenness of the hegemonic cultural values. Society presents in theory a criterion for adaptation that feigns, from time to time, in the forms of eternity (of Nature), a reified world that grants consistency to the consciousness subjected to the relativity of needs. The moment Michelstaedter realizes that modernity is characterized by the real (not subjective, not idealistic) use of the powers of abstraction, which are powers very different from those of Metaphysics (which become the manner in which bourgeois thought feigns the persistence of feudal thought in order to go on presenting itself as revolutionary), it is no longer even a matter of choosing between the One and the manifold. This is because all that is henceforth produced is the abstraction of the particular modes that separate men from themselves.

By equating Being to the deficiency imposed by the modes of existence of society (the search for that kind of being, which is also the recognition of the practical, deficient side of the subject's life, is precisely what the mechanism of rhetoric aims at preventing), Michelstaedter effectively demolishes the myth of autonomy of thought, which he reconducts to the forms of its social behavior, the forms to which thought born out of need adapts. It is outside the recognition of this deficiency that lies the emancipation of atomized man in the hinge of civil society that conceals its atomization.

4.

Pirandello's attack on the rules of rhetoric ends up turning into the biologism of the humor dynamic, while, Michelstaedter's attack on the rules of rhetoric becomes the negative historical consciousness of the face that Rhetoric assumes from time to time as the hegemonic cultural form of a social order. The Rhetoric outlined by Pirandello is the objectifying immobilization of a law of nature which, from an epistemological point of view, can no longer exist. However, the Rhetoric outlined by Michelstaedter contains in itself both movement and its immobilization; indeed, it is the artificial immobilization of movement, created not on the grounds of a theoretical-epistemological point of view but on the consent that, from time to time, makes the movement hegemonic. A reality

²³ Cf. Jameson: «in reality what we call style is a relatively recent phenomenon and comes into being along with the middle-class world itself. It may be thought of as a consequence of the abandonment of that classical system of education which was built around Latin and Greek texts; for style is essentially that which in modern middle-class culture replaces the rhetoric of the classical period. [...] Style [...] is the very element of individuality» (*Marxism and Form* 333-34).

dominated by exchange (*neikos*) identifies in the forms of knowledge the hinge that gives cohesiveness to its disarticulation, remolding all of society (the sum of the needs of men who adapt to the dominant ideology that can best satisfy them) in its own image. It is a second nature abstracted from the life of the subject – an objective world now extraneous to man who created it – but very concrete in its effects: an abstraction no longer identified (mystified!) in the timelessness of rules expressing an indestructible social cohesion (religion, metaphysics, etc), but in the continuous modification of these rules, which, however, are always presented as eternal. The rhetorician can no longer refer to fixed propositions expressing a Platonic universality, yet the imitative process does not vanish, nor does the need for adaptation: this must now be referred to the substantiality performatively attributed to the changeable. The subject maintains with substantiality the same relation of identification that connected him to the rules of the old Rhetoric, because it is still that substantiality that structures his being in the world. Therefore, relativity (temporality) is not, as believed by Pirandello's Modernism, the liberation from the conceptual cages of abstract Being, but the terrain that, lacking Being, restates it as Substance and presents it as a Value that is still Law. Furthermore, the individual cannot change these laws; he cannot escape Rhetoric, because only by adapting to them (placing himself in a contemplative attitude before them, in a relation of usefulness) can he achieve the satisfaction of his needs. It is this same satisfaction that will grant him, surreptitiously, an ontological consistency. In fact, even an ontological consistency that transpires as absence of ontology, because that absence too comes within the usual utilitarian/calculistic attitude with which the subject relates to the «system of relativity» (the dominant ideology) he is confronted with:

Just as a man turns a lever or presses a button of a machine to have certain reactions, [...] though he does not know whence they proceed and he does not know how to create them—so he relates to them only by means of the conventional sign. Thus does the man in society act: he finds the conventional sign on the keyboard prepared like a note on a piano. And conventional signs join together in conventional ways, in made-up complexes. He plays not his own melody but phrases *prescribed* by others. (*Persuasion* 129-30)

That ontology is ideology: the particular purpose appearing as the dominant form, covering the depths of its particularity in the categories of being. These do not vanish with the rejection of transcendence, but reappear, each time changed, to objectify the manifold as truth. While on the one hand the new rhetoric presents itself as a victory on time (on change), on the other it can absolutely not do without it. This is because the new rhetoric needs to be continuously restated on the basis of different needs, the needs of whoever determines the changes on the prevailing horizon of thought, restating them as an abstract form of objectivity. Rhetoric, having lost its timeless referent, attaches itself to the current beliefs legitimizing the existing reality, thereby separating men from the material reality of their condition, projecting them, in the sphere of knowledge, into a conceptualization that is distinct from that reality while at the same time, in the subject's consciousness, legitimizing it. Man, perceiving that sphere of knowledge as the ontological structuring of his unstable identity, becomes free in an abstract manner, in contradiction with his real self, transferred into the realm of a universality (even the universality of the new *condition humaine* outlined by Pirandello) that has nothing to do with him. But that ontological insubstantiality is the real material of this universality: the isolated systems that men represent are rationalized, in theory, in the safety of theory, as the truth of the ideology that determines them.

The sense of a classical harmony, of universal norms, was no doubt the sense of a dominion. But when Modernism appears, that dominion is no longer the one involved, and those who pretend it still is are hiding their own dominion behind it. The destruction of the norms of objectivity covers the mystification of an objectivity built on “time” and aimed at concealing, in abstraction, the real accidental conditions in which the subject still finds himself.

In Italy, the respective positions of Pirandello and Michelstaedter are at the center of the modernist battlefield. But Pirandello, who refuses to support the reasons of a social hegemony with the modes of thought (considering the latter independent), ends up relating his own subjective point of view to what Michelstaedter would call the historical-ideological reality of the present. His analysis is extraordinary because it is a perfect mirror of that very present. Michelstaedter, instead, by not limiting his analysis to the field of theory but expanding it to include its social function, was able to break apart the binomial pairs of bourgeois thought (*Kultur/Zivilisation*, Rhetoric/Humor, etc.) that find expression in Modernism, basing in them the sense of a confrontation that is no longer the one underway, the sense of a confrontation that masks the real battle: the battle against a class that, epistemologically, can use as its weapons both the elements of those pairs. This class can even use in its favor the conflict that is implicit in these pairs. Michelstaedter, although unable (we are still in 1910!) to transpose his analysis into the real mechanisms of the field of labor (and therefore reaching an operational *impasse*), brings bourgeois thought to recognize itself as inadequate to delineate the Universality yearned for by the bourgeois class that expresses that very thought.

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