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Beyond Postmodernism: Michelstaedter, Strong Feeling, The Present

Mario Perniola

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite the success of official commemorations, the marked increase in academic publications, and the growing journalistic interest, one might ponder whether the thought of Michelstaedter has actually acquired any essential significance for the militant culture. But is it still meaningful to speak of a militant culture? Is it not true that institutions, universities, and the mass media occupy the entire cultural sphere? And is it not also true that Postmodernism has sanctioned the end of the avant-gardes and established a cultural pacifism within which there might be room for quarrels and connivances, but not for real conflicts or true relations?

The two questions—namely, the one concerning the vitality

[Translated from the Italian by Daniela Bini and Renate Holub]

and fecundity of Michelstaedter's thought, and the other concerning the possibility of a militant culture—are, no doubt, closely connected. However, at first sight, the cultural climate and the collective sensibility of the present era do not seem to be favorably inclined towards the passionate and intransigent radicalism which animates Michelstaedter's work, as they do not seem to be favorably inclined towards a culture which would give serious thought to the present, and to ways of changing it. Everything seems to be reduced nowadays to the daily tactical ministering of the spheres of feelings, interests, and ideas which appear to be obvious, taken for granted, and consented to. To say it with Michelstaedter, everything seems to adapt itself to a "sufficiency" of the given, to generalized "adulation," to a "league of scoundrels" in other words, to the triumph of "rhetorics" [*rettorica*] in life.

However, does this analysis, which assigns to "rhetorics" centrality and power in this world, and which relegates "persuasion" to the far end of an outdated and impotent morality, does this analysis reflect indeed the present situation? Or is it perhaps the mechanical reproduction of a commonplace? In my view, it is quite simplistic to consider victory the synonym for "rhetoric," and defeat the synonym for "persuasion." Things are—or at least have become—somewhat more complex.

Too often we forget that Michelstaedter's world of "rhetorics" is not only false and unjust, but also boring and melancholic. He writes:

Since they do not possess anything and cannot give anything, the "rhetorics" people slip into words which feign communication: since they cannot put into effect that everyone be the world of the others, they counterfeit words in which to contain the absolute world, and they feed their boredom with words, and with words they create a poultice to soothe their pains. (*Opere* 61)*

If the essential characteristic of "rhetorics" is the loss of the present, then melancholy is "the all-inclusive desire for a life which is no longer in the present; it is a desire for that complexity of desires which makes the life of the past useless" (796). It is here where we begin to note a difference between Michelstaedter's time and our own. We take for granted, as did Michelstaedter's contemporaries, that the world is false and unjust, but unlike

*Michelstaedter's quotes are from his *Opere* (Florence: Sansoni, 1958), and will be given by page number in parentheses.

them, we do not take it for all that certain that it necessarily must also be boring and melancholic. To the contrary, the age of labor, which Michelstaedter has drafted under the name of "rhetorics," an age which is founded on fatigue, obedience, and in conclusive verbosity, and which concerns itself with the production of idealities, such as the judge, the teacher, the executioner, such an age seems to be particularly far removed from our present situation, or at least from the currently emerging needs. The age of "loisir" cannot be, after all, either boring or melancholic: it also has to become interesting and efficacious, at any cost.

This is how a rather surprising and paradoxical turning point finds its groundings, with respect not only to Michelstaedter's epoch, but also with respect to the general cultural tendency inaugurated in the eighties and known as Postmodernism. This tendency, quite predominant up to now, is grounded on a set of premises which are the subject of increasing doubts and perplexities: for Postmodernism had quite surreptitiously presumed that the age of "loisir" would be carried by an emotive tonality of the cynical-recreative kind, by a class of low profile intellectuals, by a philosophical orientation which privileges the past. Postmodernism is the child of the reaction to the cultural climate produced by the protest movements of the sixties and seventies, a climate which was carried by a different emotive tonality, of the emphatic and subjective kind; and by a class of intellectuals which relegated to itself social leadership, as well as by a philosophical orientation which privileged the future. It is quite evident that neither the protest movement nor Postmodernism would see in Michelstaedter a precursor. Yet "persuasion" offers a third possibility, one which is neither reducible to protest nor to Postmodernism.

This is why to deal with Michelstaedter today means to consider him the point of departure of a new cultural tendency, which we might see as an alternative to the protest movement, and to Postmodernism as well; it means going beyond merely official commemorations, academic publications, and journalistic scoops. What it means is the reaffirmation of the possibility of a militant culture which would like to be in a somewhat more direct contact with society.

2. *STRONG FEELING*

Three basic issues seem to mark this new cultural tendency emerging in the wake of Michelstaedter. In the area of emotions,

the experience of a *strong feeling* [*forte sentire*]; in the area of social interaction, the rise of the *high profile intellectual*; and in the area of philosophical meditation, the development of a *philosophy of the present*.

The experience of a strong feeling, the experience of "making oneself into flame," to use one of Michelstaedter's formulations—which is the first issue under consideration here—is related to a profound dissatisfaction with the *Stimmung* that marks Postmodernism, that tonality of a cynical-depressive, of a melancholic-recreative, of a frivolous and fatuous kind. The initial liberational charge implicit in the lightness of Postmodernism has completely exhausted itself in the disgust for a lifestyle which precludes differences and disorders. Postmodernisms oozes with boredom: this total acquiescence and consent to universal inconsistencies, and this state of misery, when it comes to emotions and feelings, ultimately generates a flatness which emanates intellectual pretensions only because it somersaults in every direction and, in fact, this Postmodern cultural atmosphere has produced a good number of people who think of themselves as spirited and funny because, as Michelstaedter would say, they reveal "the absolute absence of essence in that which has the respect of others" (791). But, continues Michelstaedter, "mind [*spirito*] is the activity of a person who aims downwards and not upwards. . . . Anyone is capable of putting something large into something small and then mock it." It seems to me quite telling that the Postmodern mind arrives at boredom precisely because it is mind which is Postmodern, such that one senses the need of something more intense and more tangible. So a priestess of the Afro-Brasilian cults (*mae de santo*) in Bahia told me a while ago: "Westerners have no longer either soul or body, because they consider them opposites. They only have mind [*spirito*]. The world is active," so that priestess continued, "it is never neutral, it is always either in our favor or against us. The main thing is to see ourselves in a position of strength and that we find ourselves in all things." This is why neutrality, escapism into the past, and bland Postmodern hedonism consume us slowly and imperceptibly, leaving us defenseless. Paraphrasing Sophocles, Michelstaedter quite effectively summarizes in a single sentence that experience of strong feeling: "Each one of us finds him/herself in every moment of one's life there where it is no longer wise to linger, yet that is the culmination of one's work" (37). Thus the *acmé* the moment of culmination, does not constitute a rare or privileged moment, a dimension of free and intense experience belonging to a distant

past or an improbable future, but, rather, it represents a constantly present opportunity for those who humbly care to listen to that which emerges from the present, to that which is coming [*sopraggiunge*] *hic et nunc*, and to that which is manifested in things. In fact, Michelstaedter opposes the person who places him/herself *before the things*, [*avanti alle cose*] who uses things as a means to an end, to that person who places him/herself into the things [*vive nelle cose*]. The former has an instrumental relation with the world; the latter, on the other hand, places desire and pleasure into the things *qua* things, in their essence, that is. The former desires the sea, for he/she can swim in it; the latter loves the sea for itself. The former loves his/her friend because s/he is useful; the latter, the friend *qua* friend. Now this "strong feeling" is actually a living in the things, an allowing for the things to manifest themselves, a waiting for a mutual recognition of "those who have a strong spark and a simple soul."

This is why the "strong feeling" is essentially quite different from the subjectivist vitalism of the protest movement. From a Michelstaedterian point of view, there is no doubt that many aspects of the protest movement belong to "rhetorics" [*rettorica*], which Michelstaedter defines precisely as an "inadequate assertion of individuality," as the illusory pretense of "constituting a person" on the basis of an absolute pretension (60). Be it as it may, "strong feeling" is far removed from both the vitalistic emphasis of the protest movement as well as from that sentimental Postmodern softness. An essential aspect of Michelstaedter's thought is precisely his radical critique of vitalism, which he views as incapable of living the present, of ever completely reaching self-mastery, insatiably demanding from the future to satisfy the hunger of the present. The life that vitalism experiences is similar to a weight, which, always unable to halt its descent, is falling lower and lower, thereby always failing itself. Strong feeling has also nothing in common with the modern notion of the "subject" and "consciousness:" "the will to live according to its highest form, consciousness, lead to self-negation. . . . Consciousness can never possess itself because at the moment in which it is capable of doing so, it ceases to be consciousness" (779). As Pascal once said, "nous ne sommes jamais chez nous, nous sommes toujours au delà."

"Strong feeling" implies abandoning that illusory power relation towards the things of this world: it is necessary to let go of that subjective pathos, it is necessary to rid oneself of any arrogance, of any Prometheism, of any absurd pretension of being

the master of the world, of the past and the future; and it is necessary to remove oneself from that "correlation" and let things be and let oneself be like a thing. "Persuasion" is "wanting to possess oneself in the things, and in the things oneself" (80). As long as needs, projects, desires, the subjective element prevail, I am not allowing that things be for themselves and that they manifest themselves for what they are: I continue to see them on the basis of my need, my project, my desire: thus it is impossible to arrive at a strong experience and at the knowledge of things. "Strong feeling" implies, therefore, the disappearance of the subject which reduces everything to the pettiness and poverty of its goals and desires, pleasures and pains. "Strong feeling" is not something which originates inside the soul, it is not the expression of a subjective feeling which I experience as my own, which belongs to me, but rather it is something which arrives from the outside, "creating the presence of that which is far away" (51), of that which is foreign, other, different. I am nothing but the agency of such a feeling. The condition of that strong feeling is the rejection of subjectivity, it is the making of oneself into nothing and nobody, it is the "making of one's life in the desert" (407). It is the *making oneself a thing* [*farsi cosa*] and the *making oneself a flame* [*farsi fiamma*]: the most carnal corporeality and the most intense love coincide in that "strong feeling": the "amour fou" is born at the moment in which I feel my own body and as well as that of the other as something external and extraneous, as an object. Thus, "strong feeling" opens up an horizon of emotionality which is much different from both the protest movement and Postmodernism alike.

3. THE HIGH INTELLECTUAL PROFILE

The second aspect which sets the difference between this new tendency and Postmodernism on the one hand, and between this new tendency and the protest movement on the other, deals with the status of the intellectual. Michelstaedter's intellectual is far removed from the low-profile intellectual of Postmodernism, as well as from the leader-intellectual of the protest movement.

In this area too, we must have the courage to recognize that the downward homologization of all intellectual activities, which we have been witnessing since the mid-seventies, has meanwhile exhausted its positive effects. The loss of prestige, the demystification, the secularization of the activities of the intellectuals no doubt responded to more than legitimate demands: namely, to

prevent that the culture would remain separate, isolated from and extraneous to the violent and tumultuous growth of the information society. This twofold process of a socialization of culture and a culturization of society, which the low-profile strategy had set into motion, allowed the intellectual to exchange the negative role of transgression, indicative of all negative reflection of the seventies, with a positive, managerial, performative role. Postmodern intellectuals lack attributes because their work does not consist in creating lasting affects, in proposing or sustaining a theory or a conception of the world. Rather, it consists in circulating that which is already there. This strategy has been even too much on the winning side: the Postmodern intellectual succumbs to his/her success. The identification of culture and entertainment pursued to the point of triviality has created—from the very bottom of the age of “loisir”—the demand for specific intellectuals and for creative forms of work of high stature which would be able to counter Postmodern performative indeterminacy.

It is precisely because of the need for a high-profile intellectual that the figure and the work of Michelstaedter can be rescued from the metahistorical marginality in which it has been confined for three quarters of a century, and can acquire a central place not only in European thought but also in the literature of the twentieth century. The Michelstaedterian model of the intellectual has nothing to do with the notion of leadership, a role which the protest movement used to assign to the intellectual. Today society is not looking for *maîtres-à-penser*, and Michelstaedter never aspired to be one anyhow. “You cannot arrive at persuasion in a crowd.” The road to health

is not a bus ride, has no street signs, no indications which can be communicated, studied repeated (65); . . . every value placed as an absolute value is arbitrary, and whoever entrusts him/herself to it and charges it with what s/he feels, must remain an invalid forever. But each one must perform his/her own revolution, must create him/herself anew, if one wants to achieve life. (70)

This extreme vindication of the uniqueness and autonomy of experience is summarized by the sentence “*Si duo faciunt idem, non est idem*” (65).

After all, the intellectuals of the protest movement and of Postmodernism alike are born from frustration, from the feeling that insofar as they are intellectuals, they are being cut off from the world, from history, from reality. The intellectual of the protest movement tries to overcome this extraneousness by positing him/

herself as the master of history, whereas the latter category of intellectuals consider themselves as history's servants. We are dealing here with two strategies which seem outdated to me, since today the intellectual is already world, history, thing. The formation of a group of acolytes or the fact of being constantly in motion, incessantly building cultural networks, by now does not seem to add anything to the power of the intellectual. In fact, these activities flatten the intellectual in a medium-low dimensionality, whose arcana are known to everyone in the street, just as the principles of the Reason of State in the seventeenth century were known to every cartdriver. Baltasar Gracià's aphorisms were never as true as they are today:

The only thing we really possess is time. . . . Unhappiness is wasting precious life in mechanical activities, and equally unhappy is wasting one's time in the excesses of lofty activities. One must not overload oneself with occupations or with envy: this leads to trampling life and to suffocating the soul. (*Oracolo Manuale*, Par. 247)

What the age of "loisir" is asking today from the intellectual is precisely what Michelstaedter defines as *persuasion*, the actual possession of oneself. The style of both the protest movement and of Postmodernism no longer adds much to the status of the intellectual. That direct or indirect self-promotion, executed in frenetic pulsations, is no longer necessary, precisely because it happens to be this frenetic self-promotion which diminishes the intellectual's credibility. Through it, in fact, one offers oneself not as real to oneself (59), while simultaneously having to be the *thing* that one is.

The figure of a high-profile intellectual as evoked by Michelstaedter again turns on the age-old problem of the subject of literature, that is, of the author. The intellectuals of the protest movement grounded their legitimacy in the group in whose name they spoke. The Postmodern intellectuals instead tended to lose themselves in the network of cultural relations they were weaving. It seems quite appropriate to ask, therefore, whether the high-profile intellectuals represent a return of a strong authorial subject. I doubt it. Hardly a return, the new tendency is rather a new phenomenon.

The high-profile intellectual is not a subject, it is a *thing*. And it is around this thing that the traces are organized. Those traces are only in part authorial (true works and occasional writings), many are in fact non-authorial (i.e., iconographic documentation,

his library, his tomb, and so forth). And even those traces which are somewhat authorial, even those more subjective ones as autobiographies, letters, or diaries, those also must not be considered the expression of a subject, but, rather, they must be understood as things which determine something more overarching which gathers them. After all, it is implicit in the very essence of writing to be a thing, to be something irreducible to the transcription of the voice, to the breath of spirit. In Postmodernism this essential dimension of writing was finally cancelled by the ephemeral entertainment of readers and writers alike. In this new tendency sketched here, the essential dimension of writing, namely, its being trace, is extended to everything, and that inaugurates a new category of high-profile writers and readers. The social legitimacy of this new class of high-profile writers and readers does not derive from the pretension of constructing a sort of aristocracy of the spirit in a world which appears to be sliding towards barbarism and ignorance, but, rather, that legitimacy derives from the sensation of being in direct contact with the emerging age of the thing, which follows the age of the image. Michelstaedter underlines with great effectiveness the difference between weak writers (who would probably better be called scribblers) and strong writers (that is, a writer in the real sense of the word). The former never arrive at saying the thing, although they keep saying many things, dragging along their lives while gradually accommodating themselves to necessary continuities. The latter feel that they must say "the whole thing always and in every instance."

4. *THE PHILOSOPHY OF THE PRESENT*

To prefer the present to both the past and the future is the third aspect which differentiates this new tendency from Postmodernism and the protest movement alike. The utopia of the protest movement of the sixties and seventies essentially consisted in the prefiguration of a time to come; the hermeneutics of the eighties focus on the academic-bureaucratic management of the past. Returning to Michelstaedter now means to uphold a third perspective which would like to "hold one's life in the present" (278). The protest movement lived off faith and hope. The result was delusion and frustration. Michelstaedter is the implacable critic of a behavior which is totally projected towards the future. His view on this topic is very effectively expressed by the following Venetian saying:

One hopes that stones
might become bread
so that the poor
can eat them.
One hopes that water
becomes champagne
so that we don't complain
about this celebration.
One hopes that by hoping
the time will come
that everything will go to hell
so not to hope any longer.
(36-37)

Se spera che isassi
deventa paneti,
perché i povareti
li possa magnar.
Se spera che l'acqua
deventa sciampagna
perché no i se lagna
de sto giubilar.
Se spera sperando
che vegnerà l'ord
de andar in malora
per più no sperar.

Postmodernism, on the other hand, lived off disillusionment and entertainment; the result was melancholy and boredom. In an article dedicated to Tolstoi, Michelstaedter writes words which very well describe the Postmodern condition:

We look around us: we live in a world of corpses; corpses who eat, drink, sleep, talk but nevertheless do not cease to be corpses. (651)

If the protesters had the souls of fanatics, the Postmoderns have the souls of fakirs.

A philosophy of the present is also a philosophy of presence. As such it stands at the opposite pole of negative thought and the various forms which it has recently adopted: Crisis of reason, nihilism, weak thought, and so forth. "The one who strongly desires life . . . asks to possess it now" (36). That person does not complain about the absence of anything, nor does that person regret the lack of anything, nor mourn the loss of value and positive entities. First of all, because values and ideals have always been too unreal, too abstract: "the person who has no longer any needs, no longer has any values" (358). Secondly, because anything positive which the past transmits will be appropriated, taken in, and made alive in the present. "At every point, in the present moment of affirmation, there is the intimacy of the most distant things" (50). The minds which are inspired by Michelstaedter neither consider the world an empty entity, nor do they view society under the sign of a *kenosis*; the *health* of which Michelstaedter speaks presupposes the image of a full world, of a *pléroma*, in which everything which is important is available (365). *Health* means, in fact, to remove oneself from need, it means to *con-sist* in the midst of things, "to go through activity toward peace" (52).

Yet that peace is not something immobile and eternal. Michelstaedter's point of arrival is not metaphysics: his thought is essentially oriented towards historical reality, towards the phenomenon, the thing. The horizon in which it moves is an horizon opened by the historical world. However, contrary to those who pursue history because they understand it (maybe rightly so) as something external to themselves, the Michelstaedterian idea of presence is itself history in the strongest form. Its militancy does not derive from the subjective will of the thinker, from "engagement," but rather it is inherent in the direct contact [*presa diretta*], so to speak, between thought and the world of history. The present is something more than the object of philosophy: it thinks itself through philosophy. The thinker is actually the person who, in order to be able to listen to the present in all its paradoxes and differences, makes him/herself into nothing and no-one. It is the person who silences desires, inordinate affections, and opinions so as to not pose obstacles and misleading schemes to the understanding of the manifestations of history. It is the person who makes him/herself into the single conduit of phenomena, their place of transit, their *gateway* to phenomena which surprise, upset, and amaze us, which constantly present themselves in an unexpected and unpredictable way.

But in which way does a thinker become such a pure conduit of the present? Both protesters and postmoderns ignored that this event takes place in the reading and in the writing process; they ignored that the "thinker" is essentially a reader and writer. Even on this level the figure of Michelstaedter, in whom philosophy and literature are bound together by a relationship of mutual belonging, appears to be quite exemplary. "The immorality of a person who speaks without 'persuasion,'" writes Michelstaedter, "manifests itself in every world that is born from the pen, because of its vague, arbitrary, limited content and because of the incoherent, albeit easily and vulgarly satisfied, connection." (708) Now the meeting ground between philosophy and literature to which this tendency inspired by Michelstaedter leads, is precisely the opposite of this vagueness: it aspires to the determination of the thing and to its perfection. It is on account of this issue that the militant culture should "blow up the bridges during retreat," and allow itself to grasp the essentials: strong feeling, intellectual high profile, and intimate connection [*presa diretta*] with the present are the three moments in which the central role of reading and writing in history manifests itself.