

# Rhetoric of Youth, or Bridges to Nowhere

Thomas Harrison

Architecturally speaking, there comes a stage in life that looks like a house. Everything appears already built up, all filled with kids and furniture, functionally disposed in interconnected spaces. The age of adulthood. Childhood instead is a playground, with apparatuses for swinging and climbing and an open court to serve their somewhat anarchic whims. What leads to the adult house is a road, which most people embark on in their twenties, as they decide what to do with their lives. But before one finds this road one needs to pass a bridge: the architectonics of youth, which, as I understand it in this paper, entails a passage between two distinct terrains, each more distinct than the passage between them: childhood and adulthood. Youth is not the road to the house of adulthood, which is discovered later; youth is a bridge, taking us to a place from which many roads start. Committing to an adult project means choosing one of them.

In concrete fact, life is composed of many bridges, and often where we least expect them. One avoids them only by dying, and then, of course, at the cost of staring another, colossal, bridge in the face—perhaps the same one we crossed unconsciously, and in the opposite direction, by being born. Even so, the development of an individual life usually posits a major crossing between two big banks that Freud synthetically characterized as governed, one, by the pleasure principle, and the other by the principle of reality. The idea is that children, if left to their own devices, would devote themselves entirely to seeking their own pleasure. Adults, instead, have come to accept that they can pursue and obtain pleasure only after respecting the hard facts of life,

including the need to work and to frequently defer amusements' enticements. Youth is the passage from one of these orders to the other.

Different cultures conceive of this crossing differently, assigning it different times and tasks in life. The more open a society, which means the more options it affords its members, the more bridge-like its youth would seem<sup>1</sup>. When there are many roads one can take as an adult, and many houses to choose from, the bridgework depends largely on the initiative of an individual subject. Building the bridge amounts to self-testing and self-discovery, both key features of an age which, according to the master psychologist of youth, Erik Erikson, is a kind of interregnum or state of suspension between two more coherent blocks of life: «The adolescent mind is essentially a mind of the *moratorium*, a psychosocial stage between childhood and adulthood, and between the morality learned by the child and the ethics to be developed by the adult» (Erikson 1963: 262-263). Through a process of exploration, experience, growth and pain<sup>2</sup>, the purpose of youth is identity formation. One achieves that purpose through a series of accomplishments: by integrating one's ego into a broader community, or allowing the "I" to become part of a "We"; by making the ego generative (normally through sexual procreation, but also through works); and most importantly by learning how to *synthesize* the conflicting impulses of youth into a whole which, for better or worse, one recognizes as one's self. The ultimate objective is the achievement of individual authority and autonomy, an achievement, as we know, which youth frequently claims *avant le mot*, as though it were a genetic entitlement. Antigone, for example, engaged in a passionate defense of «the moral certainty of the young; Romeo and Juliet claim the authority of their passion against the rigid antagonism of their parents» (Spacks 1981: 6). In his famous essay on «Family Romances», Freud, himself a

---

<sup>1</sup> I take the distinction between open and closed societies from Ferdinand Tönnies' classic study of 1887, cfr. Tönnies 1988.

<sup>2</sup> These are the terms with which Patricia Meyer Spacks, in her study of *The Adolescent Idea* in English literature, elaborates Erikson's idea of youth as testing and discovery, cfr. Spacks 1981: 3-18.

child of an open society, flatly declared that «the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations» (Spacks 1981: 5). Of course one of the easiest ways to claim authority is to attack those who have it, so that it is hard to know when these passionate youths are really wedded to a cause or are just using it as a weapon against their elders. Either way, when the conflict is resolved, the reward is a new space of belonging, the formation of a new home and community.

In societies that are relatively closed, by contrast, one generation lives much like the one that preceded it. Here the bridge of youth is not the construct of an individual so much as a joint thoroughfare. In fact, it is hardly that different from a road. The life lying ahead appears more or less scripted beforehand, answering primarily to the needs of a particular tradition and trade. Differences between the terrain on this bank and that are not always that marked, with children often acting like mini-adults from an early age onward. The bridge from one side to the other need not be dramatic, signaling a rupture or instilling an anxiety of destination.

Whether the society is open or closed, however, the security of the crossing depends essentially on the stability of the culture. In either event transitions remain unproblematic so long as adolescents face firm and clear adult options. American schoolchildren rehearse very early for their steps on the bridge, planning their choices for college and pondering some years in advance the lifestyles and professions the system deems viable. What makes the bridge crossing precarious is an inordinate *discontinuity* between this side of the river and that. Usually the mismatch depends on unrealistic expectations formed in childhood (whether through a failed education or psychological malformation). But the more interesting cases of discontinuity arise from a seismic change in terrain when one is already on the bridge. To put it another way, there are bridge-ages in *history* as well as in the span of an individual life, for example, when the times are suddenly convulsed—by war, by social revolution, by radical changes of political regime, and

so on<sup>3</sup>. When the two meet—the bridge-age of youth encountering a bridge-moment in history—the situation can be just as promising for youth as it is disruptive.

Historical bridge-experiences tend to be registered collectively, by an entire population, and most intensely by the young: in the Romantic epoch following the French Revolution, for example; or in the generation of 1968; or with the collapse of East European communism; or no doubt, too, in the currently war-torn countries of Iraq and Afghanistan. Those whose psyches are most affected by these moments of cultural insecurity are in transit, their decisions swayed by everything that happens between the world they are leaving behind and the world they planned to join. The young, who already stand on an ethical bridge, find their insecurity doubled by bridge moments in history, their footing doubly threatened by social crisis.

An indication of this syndrome can be found in the novel called *The Bridge over the Drina*, written in the 1940s by the Nobel Prize winner (1961) Ivo Andric. The book is an episodic, historical fiction relating the lives of Bosnians over the course of four centuries, from the building of that bridge in Visegrad by the Turks (in 1571-77) to the outbreak of World War I. The book ends with the story of a «generation of rebel angels» (Andric 1959: 232) on these fringes of the Austro-Hungarian empire, who came to ruin at the double juncture they faced in 1914: at the bridge to their own adulthood and the bridge to the imagined new republics of central Europe.

These were the first children of Bosnian peasants and petty artisans, notes Andric, who were able to attend universities and, from the universities and schools they attended, from the great cities of Vienna and Sarajevo, «these young men came back intoxicated with that feeling of proud audacity with which his first and incomplete knowledge fills a man, and carried away by ideas about the rights of peoples to freedom and of individuals to enjoyment and dignity»

---

<sup>3</sup> This is a situation over and beyond *personal* bridge-experiences, such as a death in the family, an emigration during adolescence, and so on.

(Andric 1959: 231). Without making any special effort of their own, continues Andric, these young men

had obtained from fate ... a free entry into the world and the great illusion of freedom ... there was not one of them who did not have the feeling that he could take what he wished [from that world] and that all that he took was his. Life (that word comes up very often in their conversation, as it did in the literature and politics of the time, when it was always written with a capital letter), Life stood before them as an object, as a field of action for their liberated senses, for their intellectual curiosity and their sentimental exploits, which knew no limits. All roads were open to them, onward to infinity. (*Ibid.*: 232-33)

Andric's own judgment on this situation (and mind you, he was one of them), is acerbically recorded as follows: «It is hard to imagine a more dangerous manner of entering into life or a surer way towards exceptional deeds or total disaster» (*ibid.*: 233). Indeed when one's expectations for the future are as grand as these, it is hard to imagine how exceptional deeds can even be kept clear from total disaster. In this young generation the project that normally guides the coming of age was doubled, and historically double-crossed. The danger lay in conflating a program for self-realization with a program for national independence, turning the two into one. And to make matters worse, these Bosnians imagined that their point of arrival would be utterly antithetical to their point of departure.

To be sure, all human generations have their own «illusions with regard to civilization», writes Andric; «some believe that they are taking part in its upsurge, others that they are witnesses of its extinction». On the eve of this War the Bosnian generation

was richer only in illusions.... It had the feeling both of lighting the first fires of one new civilization and extinguishing the last flickers of another which was burning out. What could especially be said of them was that there had not been for a long time past a generation which with greater boldness had dreamed and spoken

about life, enjoyment and freedom and which had received less of life, suffered worse, laboured harder and died more often than had this one. But in those summer days of 1913 all was still undetermined, unsure. Everything appeared as an exciting new game on that ancient bridge, which shone in the moonlight of those July nights, clean, young and unalterable, strong and lovely in its perfection, stronger than all that time might bring and men imagine and do. (*Ibid.*: 233-234)

No doubt there are echoes here of the great study of the Austro-Hungarian Empire on the eve of the War called *The Man Without Qualities*, by Robert Musil, and perhaps even a foretaste of studies to come of the particularities of the war generation<sup>4</sup>. But no work is so specific about the collusion between a cultural bridge-moment and a bridge-age in life that is singularly disposed towards it. To emphasize the critical nature of this link Andric stages these young Bosnians' conversations about their future on a bridge, that very bridge over the Drina that once brought the Muslim empire face-to-face with Christian Europe. But like that bridge, whose political function had for some time been rendered obsolete by a railroad, so too the youth of this transitional moment was destined not to reach its goal. Those who in 1913 dreamed «about life, enjoyment and freedom» with such boldness were the very same people who «suffered worse, labored harder and died more often» than any generation before it. Their bridge led nowhere.

Were it not for this complication we would have only one side of the dialectics of youth. We would have that ethos described in Andric's pages which is so redolent of D'Annunzio and Marinetti: the full-throttle forward, the sanguine propulsion toward self-assertion, toward seizing each occasion for the furtherance of one's notions. Many youths incanted such tones on the eve of the Great War and later recanted; some perdured in their youthful vein their whole lives long. The passionate commitment to change is only one half of the dialectics

---

<sup>4</sup> For example Wohl 1979; Fussell 2000; Eksteins 1990.

of a bridge-age in a bridge-moment of culture. If you flip it over, the overweening enthusiasm of youth, its sentimental intellectualism and absolutism, reveals a susceptibility to depression, the fragility of youth's faith, its quickness to sense defeat. Being on the bridge, I contend, is a bi-polar experience. Some youths keep their eyes on the envisioned bank, some waver and totter, some even jump off. The most eloquent rhetoric of youth recognizes the suspended condition, registering the conflict *as* conflict.

The bridge-moment of 1914 collapsed under the burdens it was made to bear. The greater the promise it extended, the more uncertain the situation ahead. A similar scenario occurs in the years following the French revolution, an event which inspires the youth of Europe to exalt its bridge-like nature in the most fervid manner, filling the shores with the cries of a Byron and Keats and Hölderlin and Shelley, all intent on an ideal shore. These writings bridge two bridge-experiences: one of youth and one of culture. And we find it again in the late 1960s, where it was mainly music that functioned this way, and where it is hard to imagine its lyrics being written by anyone over twenty-five, and neither ten years earlier nor ten years later. If such works of the young *did not* articulate two bridge-ages, they would not hold half the interest that they do. Nor would they hold that interest if their authors had crossed the bridge without trauma. They would not have been true spokesmen of youth.

In the post-revolutionary age, a young man who undergoes a syndrome similar to that of Andrić's generation is Ugo Foscolo. Born in 1778, he composes his epistolary novel, *Ultime lettere di Iacopo Ortis* at age nineteen in the wake of the clamorous opportunities that the emperor Napoleon had created for a political revolution in Europe. Like many other intellectuals, Foscolo was swept away by the prospect of a new, non-aristocratic form of political organization that could be instituted on the pattern of the French. But instead, his letters of Iacopo Ortis record cataclysmic disappointment. They register a young man's progress from extreme existential and political hope to embitterment, denunciation, and self-despair. The issue once again is a failed conflation of personal and national self-realization. Iacopo Ortis's

psychology evolves from the social bond of *me-and-them*, in which political aspirations are rooted, to an existential opposition of *me-against-them* to which a group-bonding youth so easily reverts when disappointed. One happens in these letters is a *non*-passage from the “me” to the “us” by which an adolescent joins an adult community and also politicizes his personal hopes.

In more practical terms, Foscolo had to have invested an enormous amount of hope in the occupation of Italy to have been so undone by its outcome. In 1797 Napoleon liberates Venice, Foscolo’s homeland, from its ruling oligarchy, to the jubilation of many, but barely five months later cedes it to Austria. A political bridge had been erected only to be torn down. That is when, in October 1797, Ortis goes into exile and starts registering his subjectivity in these letters. Within a year and a half he has committed suicide. Clearly the young Foscolo had a more ideal conception of politics than did his hero Napoleon, and quickly concluded that politics is «una perpetua ruota di servitù, di licenza e di tirannia» (a perpetual cycle of servitude, license, and tyranny, Foscolo 1981: 93-94/92)<sup>5</sup>. There is only one coherent response to this situation as far as Ortis is concerned: «Fuggirò il vitupèrio morendo ignoto» (I shall flee from shame by dying unknown, *ibid.*: 94/92). He experienced the political dead-end as a personal death. As his political and sentimental hopes are dashed, the once sanguine activist of the future finds himself stranded between all that he has left behind and an ever more distant other shore. Having idealized his future as a full-fledged Venetian, enjoying a new homeland, he now laments his lost childhood — «quel fuoco celeste che nel tempo della fresca mia gioventù spargeva raggi su tutte le cose che mi stavano intorno, mentre oggi vo brancolando in una vota oscurità!» (celestial fire which in the time of my first youth illuminated everything around, while today I am groping in vacuity and darkness, *ibid.*: 98/97). Another broken bridge severs him from the group whose goals he thought were shared: «O amico mio! ciascun individuo è nemico nato

---

<sup>5</sup> Page references to the English translations will hereafter follow those of the original.



della Società, perchè la Società è necessaria nemica degli individui» (O my friend, every individual is a born enemy of society, because society is of necessity hostile to individuals, *ibid.*: 107/108). Like so many of his age, the most fervent political believer becomes power's most bitter critic.

It could be that Foscolo's generation (like that of 1968, the travails of which are the subject of a line of Italian films from *La meglio gioventù*, 2003, to *Mio fratello è figlio unico*, 2007) over-invested in the idea of self-determination. Two years after his letters were published, John Keats had his own rhetoric for this, claiming that the world was nothing other than a «vale of Soul-making». What does he mean by Soul-making? The millions of brains and intellects that wander the earth, Keats explains, «are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself»<sup>6</sup>. The key word is "identity," the acquisition of identity, the very proof of a Soul, and the bank sought by youth. It is also a notion that, two hundred years later, we are still questioning.

A man three years younger than Keats, Giacomo Leopardi, was thoroughly disabused of all rhetorical naiveté concerning the mechanisms at work in identity formation. At age twenty-six he looked around him and concluded that his fellow Italians did not possess such an identity, nor were likely to acquire it in the course of the century. Even less did they show signs of that collective association called a nation. *Sopra i costumi degli italiani*, from 1824, stipulates that Italians lack the civic values, communal beliefs and public virtues that unify the citizens of France, Germany, England, and Russia. Italians have *usanze* but not *costumi* (usages, but not mores), primarily because they lack an authoritative, social elite to discipline their impulses. But they are cynical and disillusioned people for two other reasons: (1) they lose their childhood earlier than others, and (2) they do not find ways to «carry it over» into adult domains (Leopardi 1991: 47-59). Now anyone who knows Leopardi's work is aware that he viewed the exit from childhood as a most desolate of prospects, for it destroyed everything

---

<sup>6</sup> John Keats, *Letter to the George Keatses*, 21 April 1819; qtd. in Cousineau 1994: 157.

that made life worth living: vivacity, enthusiasm, imagination, the pull of illusion and the spirit of play. His writing addresses neither one side of the bridge nor the other; it *ponders* the bridge, unfolding the tragic nature of the crossing. And yet there are notable exceptions to the rule. The cultures of ancient Greece and Rome succeeded in pulling youth across the bridge, by sublimating its illusions and dreams into firm creeds, ideals and mores, into grand visions and art. By this logic the only *viable* passage into adulthood is one that transports the traits of childhood with it, instituting various new “reasoned” versions of play, or reasoned plays of the imagination. Aside from Greece and Rome, Leopardi commends only the Italian Renaissance and the French Revolution for re-injecting some basic illusory convictions and youthful enthusiasm into the ways of Europe, producing rare harmonies of individuality and sociality, of personal and collective good<sup>7</sup>.

The identity formation aspired to by Foscolo was, in Leopardi’s estimation, too distant a goal for the peoples of Italy. In fact, it was a losing proposition for all nations of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Leopardi clearly believed that he was living in the age of the individual, he believed that the ideology of individualism only fostered atomized sameness, nations that in truth were only aggregated masses, whose cultural specificities were destined to disappear. Prime responsibility for this paradox lay with increasingly commercial and centralized new forms of cultural mediation (what we now call the mass media), but the development was also inextricably tied to the principles of individualism that this mediation served. The overvaluation of the so-called individual identity, to which the bridge of youth is often expected to lead, was part of the reason for cultural disaggregation, for it built egoism without true forms of bonding. As the century wears on, this ideology of individualism comes under increasing philosophical pressure. One simple reason, perhaps, is that

---

<sup>7</sup> On this theme see the selections from Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* contained in Leopardi 1992, as well as Rigoni’s excellent discussion introducing the anthology.

the pursuit of “authenticity” had first to contend with something that the century made much more concrete and historically ubiquitous: inauthenticity (the idea that things are standing in the way of one’s being what one is). This may have been what Foscolo and Andric’s youth were sensing, namely, that the very history that was expected to ground one’s adult identity was impersonal, mechanical, and alien to the individual.

In the heyday of psychological and sociological research at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the problem was apparent everywhere. In the 1920s, the author of *The Man Without Qualities* writes a satirical story about that component of psychic adulthood called character. Its protagonist, a man accused of lacking such character his whole life long, finally says this in defense of himself (connecting his problem to the system he belongs to): «I am convinced», he reflects,

that the development of character is connected with the way war is waged ... and that nowadays, for this very reason, it can only be found among savages. For those who fight with knives and spears need character to come out on top. But what kind of character, however resolute, can stand up against tanks, flame throwers and clouds of poison gas?!<sup>8</sup> (Musil 1987: 113)

In addition to whatever character one might accrue by the time one is an adult, one must also take account of at least a half-dozen others:

a sexual, a national, a state, a class, and a geographical character to boot, you have a handwriting character, a character of the lines in your hand, of the shape of your skull, and if possible, a character that derives from the constellation of the stars at the

---

<sup>8</sup> Translation slightly revised. Failing to show character as an adolescent, Musil’s protagonist eventually takes to modeling himself on roles dramatized in the plays and novels that he reads, none of which proves any more viable to the ethical demands of life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century than the throwers of spears.

moment of your birth. All that is too much for me. I never know which of my characters to follow. (*Ibid.*: 112)

This man without character recommends that we give up all this talk about character and think of humanity a little more scientifically, in terms of discipline and statistics. Could it be, wonders Musil's narrator, that this much-maligned man is a forerunner of an entirely new way of being human?

Perhaps; but in the meantime the epoch had to deal with the maladjustments and frustrations that are so well described by another observer of the impersonality of accrued identity, Luigi Pirandello. What is his *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* (1921) if not an attack on the notion of viable adult identity? Although each character in that play has a very clear face, and destinies as immutable as those of Greek heroes, they all suffer from the fact that their story has not been authored, nor authorized. For our purposes the most interesting case is that of the Son, a man in his early twenties who normally would be expected to have developed an identity by this time. But that never happened. While the Father and the Mother and the Daughter in the play are oppressed by the possession of a character they did not choose, the Son suffers from the inability to develop into any character at all. His dramatic fate is thus to cry out from time to time throughout the play, «Non ho proprio nulla, io, da fare qui! Me ne lasci andare ... Io non rappresento nulla!» (Pirandello 1969: 68, 73). The speechless, unachieved Son is stuck on the bridge, utterly suspended. In this moratorium condition, there is no plot that he can belong to. And, in the meantime, while an adult plot is sought, Pirandello plots the non-plot.

For all its living complexities, the problem of the son comes down to a problem of writing, of bridging an inner intention with an outer expression. Passing into adulthood means giving a relatively coherent shape to all that is seething within or, if nothing else, of creating a bond between the fluid, dynamic inner self and the outer, enfranchised persona of a public community. The resulting identity would have the shape of a smoother or rougher connection, the structure of two banks

of a river cemented together. The characters I have discussed so far have rather more the look of a broken bridge. Now if the bridge is language—an adequate rhetoric to bridge A to B—then it follows that writings of the young can only be efforts at self-construction. The last case I will discuss is one example of one such text of youth, the written log of a young man who was on the bridge as he wrote.

Carlo Michelstaedter, the author of a great study in nihilistic idealism called *La persuasione e la rettorica* (1910), was perfectly poised to make a move into adulthood in 1908, when, at age twenty-one, he left home to attend university in Florence. Florence was an ideal city for this Italian from the Austrian empire to acquire a sense of personal and national belonging, exposing him to the productive examples of other progressive young Italians like Papini, Prezzolini, and the industrious *vocianti*, and indirectly even the Futurists. His itinerary, from a type of cultural exile in the irredentist region of Trieste to the homeland, would seem to have held promise. But Michelstaedter's passage was not successful. Instead of concluding his adult apprenticeship he took his own life the day he finished his university thesis, the same work published by Adelphi as *La persuasione e la rettorica*, at age twenty-three<sup>9</sup>. Metaphorically speaking, he jumped off the bridge.

Michelstaedter belonged to the same generation as Andrić's young Bosnians, but he never made their investment in a distant shore of personal and national self-realization. His crisis, instead of being historical (where one condition of life stands on the point of giving way to another), was cultural. The bank from which he started his youthful crossing was already fragmented, broken into different ethnic and linguistic groups not endowed with a solid model of paternal or political authority. Michelstaedter's childhood was spent in an Italian

---

<sup>9</sup> Michelstaedter 1982. This work has been published in a cluttered English edition by Russell Scott Valentino, Cinzia Sartini Blum and David J. Depew (2004). Translations will be revised and referenced immediately after the original citations. An excellent alternative to this translation is harder to find: Michelstaedter 2007.

town (Gorizia) that had been culturally and politically administered by the Austrians for more than a century; where this Italian frequented German schools while belonging to a community of liberal Jews. Unlike the crisis of Foscolo and the young Serbs in Bosnia, characterizing a moratorium *between* adolescence and adulthood, the multicultural society of Michelstaedter put adolescence itself already in crisis. The bridge in front of this Triestine youth was up in the air from the start: there was no clear idea of where it should lead, or where it should set out from.

In cases like this, where the discontinuities are synchronic even before they are diachronic, we recognize the extent to which the passage of youth can be wracked by a series of conflicts independent of age: the opposition between urban and rural lifestyles, class antagonisms, social mobility, the issues of gender identification, conflicting ideologies, and geocultural contrasts within a nation that is one only in name. At certain times and places such differences can exist on one and the same street; and still they must be bridged by any person who takes them as the raw material of personal identity.

Michelstaedter, instead of passing from one bank of confused and uncertain youth to another of ostensibly firm adult identity, records the very condition of between-ness which irremediably marks the passage. His is an exasperated scriptorial moratorium between sites that are only hypothetical unities. Unlike the bridge of more homogenous youths on the eve of the War, Michelstaedter's is one that he wanders alone, without company, and with no clear end in view. And he legitimates this crisis by projecting it onto human subjectivity at large.

His dissertation opens with the very personal, peremptory declaration, «*So che voglio e non ho cosa io voglia*» (I know that I want and do not have what I want, Michelstaedter 1982: 39/8). The dilemma is not that «I want something, but do not have it». It is that «I desire, I know that I desire, that I exist in a condition of wanting, and that this wanting cannot be appeased». Michelstaedter illustrates his point by way of a metaphor:

Un peso pende ad un gancio, e per pender soffre che non può scendere: non può uscire dal gancio, poiché quant'è peso pende e quanto pende dipende.... La sua vita è questa mancanza della sua vita. Quando esso non mancasse più di niente—ma fosse finito, perfetto: possedesse sé stesso, esso avrebbe finito d'esistere.... *Il peso non può mai esser persuaso. (Ibid.: 39-40)*

A weight hangs on a hook, and in hanging suffers that it cannot fall: it cannot get off the hook, for being a weight it is suspended, and in being suspended it is dependent..... Its life is this lack of its life. If it lacked nothing whatsoever—but were finished, perfect: if it possessed itself, it would cease to exist.... *The weight can never be persuaded. (8-9)*

The weight cannot be itself, “what it is,” without being held up, without being stopped from reaching a place that would satisfy it. It represents the eternal bridge of desire, the link between self and other, or self and world, whose union is the very objective of youth. This bridge-condition is an experience of distance and tension, of not-being and not reaching, a situation particularly dramatic for youth in periods of cultural multiplicity, transition or crisis. To borrow the words of Simone Weil, it amounts to a realization that ultimately humans possess nothing in the world «except the power to say ‘I’» (*Ibid.:71*), and that this “I” on which we build our claims is a shifter without substance.

Like Weil, Michelstaedter generalizes the dilemma to humanity at large. *La persuasione e la rettorica* provides an elaborate proof for this lack of identity as the *only real basis* for self-possession, as a paradoxical authenticity variously propounded by the teachings of the Buddha, by Jesus of Nazareth, Socrates, Leopardi, and the Greek tragedians. To be human is to be on an eternal and interminable bridge crossing. This is that metaphysics of desire which culture can only mitigate, providing practical resolutions in the form of a binding profession, a joint life with a loved person, a secure and comforting lifestyle. But all these, for Michelstaedter, are the trappings of “rhetoric”—an inadequate linguistic practice. His persuasion, instead, the inner conviction of self,

remains voiceless, for it recognizes that the possession of oneself in things outside oneself is impossible, that one is suspended instead on a bridge, a non-place perhaps, but more firmly one's own than the places on either side.

Only youth can speak this way, even if what it says is perfectly true. With its inbred yearning, its predilection for poetry, longing, and unfulfillment, its stylistic experiments and self-projections, youth can readily declare the *permanence* of such a condition, which other ages cannot live in. This is what both György Lukács and Walter Benjamin called the «metaphysics of youth», which could also be called a metaphysics of the soul, and it never establishes a reign on earth. At most it can create spaces for itself in the interstices between one experience and another, in the separation between the near and the far banks of a river. It is a type of homeless interregnum, to which even Iacopo Ortis, after all his romantic dreams, is ultimately committed. «Così nel mio furore», as he concludes, «mi prostendo su la polvere a scongiurare orrendamente un Dio che non conosco» (and so in my frenzy ... I throw myself down in the dust horribly beseeching a God whom I do not know, Foscolo 1981: 109/110)<sup>10</sup>. «Se tu mi concedevi una patria», he cries to the same unknowable divinity, «io avrei speso il mio ingegno e il mio sangue tutto per lei» (If you had granted me a homeland, I would have spent all my intellect and my blood on its behalf, *ibid.*: 131/135); but that homeland was not to be reached. Of the real life he tried so hard to achieve he can only say this, «io non la conosco se non nel sentimento del dolore» (I know it only in the feeling of grief, *ibid.*: 113/114)

This kind of writing, protracting the expanse of a bridge that most adjusted adults step off, is a crystallization of the age of youth. If mature writers possess the proper distance to *characterize* this state of mind, contextualizing its crossing in a broader landscape of life, those who speak to youth in their own voice tend to make a hyperbole of this

---

<sup>10</sup> The invocation of an “unknown God” is a familiar theme of youth. Cf. Nietzsche's youthful poem *To an Unknown God*.



same condition. In a sense they even reject the crossing, eternalizing the voice of a youth they never surpassed. Those speaking from a bridge see their youth as an absolute state, not a transitional one, adamantly presenting its suspension as a selfless condition of authenticity. Where adult writers can describe the configuration of solid bridges, this kind of youth reveals the bridge as both an act and an art of construction, secretly abhorring completion. It is an art of a somewhere whose authority is nowhere, a somewhere that is nowhere sanctioned. Paradoxical though it may seem, where youth is a bridge to nowhere, there its voice rings out most dramatically.

## Bibliography

- Andric, Ivo, *The Bridge over the Drina*, tr. Lovett F. Edwards, London, The Harvill Press, 1959.
- Cousineau, Phil, *Soul, An Archaeology*, New York, HarperCollins, 1994.
- Eksteins, Modris, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, New York, Anchor Books, 1990.
- Erikson, Erik, *Childhood and Society*, 2nd ed., New York, Norton, 1963.
- Foscolo, Ugo, *Ultime lettere di Iacopo Ortis/Poesie*, Ed. Mario Puppo, Milano, Mursia 1981, tr. F. G. Nichols, *Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis/Of Tombs*, London, Hesperus Press, 2002.
- Fussell, Paul, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Leopardi, Giacomo, *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degl'italiani*, Ed. Maurizio Moncagatta, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1991.
- Leopardi, Giacomo, *La strage delle illusioni: Pensieri sulla politica e sulla civiltà*, Ed. Mario Andrea Rigoni, Milano, Adelphi, 1992.
- Michelstaedter, Carlo, *La persuasione e la retorica*, Ed. Sergio Campailla, Milano, Adelphi, 1982, tr. Russell Scott Valentino - Cinzia Sartini Blum - David J. Depew, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2004.
- Michelstaedter, Carlo, *Persuasion and Rhetoric*, trans. Wilhelm Snyman - Giuseppe Stellardi, University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2007.

Musil, Robert, "A Man Without Character," in *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, tr. Peter Wortsman, Hygiene (CO), Eridanos Press, 1987.

Pirandello, Luigi, *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*, in *Three Plays*, Ed. Felicity Firth, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1969.

Spacks, Patricia Meyer, *The Adolescent Idea: Myths of Youth and the Adult Imagination*, New York, Basic Books, 1981.

Tönnies, Ferdinand, *Community and Society* (1887), Ed. John Samples New Brunswick (N.J.), Transaction Books, 1988.

Wohl, Robert, *The Generation of 1914*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1979.

## L'autore

### Thomas Harrison

Thomas Harrison è professore ordinario alla University of California di Los Angeles, dove dirige il dipartimento di italianistica.

Email: [harrison@humnet.ucla.edu](mailto:harrison@humnet.ucla.edu)

## Come citare questo articolo

Harrison, Thomas, "Rhetoric of Youth, or Bridges to Nowhere", *Between*, IV.7 (2014), <http://www.Between-journal.it/>