



Carlo Michelstaedter and the Failure of Language

Daniela Bini

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"This is a work of recuperation, but it is also a work of real resonance in the context of today's postmodern philosophical and literary preoccupations. Bini has made a relatively unknown but no less significant figure of early twentieth-century Mitteleuropean culture live again in a rigorous, impassioned, and, in its own way, courageous piece of work."--Rebecca West, University of Chicago

At the turn of the century, Carlo Michelstaedter (1887-1910) flashed through the night sky of Mitteleuropa. In this first book-length study in English of the Italian cultural figure, Daniela Bini compares her subject to a meteor, a shooting star who dazzled the world briefly with his philosophy, poetry, and painting, then shot himself at the age of twenty-three.

Michelstaedter was born to a cultured Jewish family in the city of Gorizia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian empire where Italian was spoken. After completing high school he moved to Florence to study art and there met and tutored the Russian divorcée Nadia Baraden. Her suicide in 1907 marked the onset of the severe depression that plagued him the last three years of his life.

During that time, however, he produced a body of work that anticipates existentialism in philosophy and expressionism in art; his analysis and criticism of language establish him as a forerunner of Blanchot, Bataille, and Derrida. In the frenetic intellectual and artistic activity of those years, Michelstaedter repudiated the compartmentalization of all knowledge from philosophy to science. He completed his dissertation, a powerful piece of rhetoric arguing against rhetoric, on the day he committed suicide.

Bini traces the trail of Michelstaedter's star, claiming that he sheds light on the twentieth century precisely because he found philosophical discourse inadequate. Based on close readings of his papers, poetry, and letters, and on a detailed analysis of his pencil and chalk drawings, she portrays him as the emblematic figure of the turn of the century, tragically frustrated in his attempts to grasp the essence of life and a mode to express it.

Daniela Bini is assistant professor of Italian at the University of Texas in Austin. She is the coauthor of *Italiano in diretta: An Introductory Course* and *Vivere all'italiana: An Italian Reader*, and the author of *Fragrance from the Desert: Poetry and Philosophy in Giacomo Leopardi*.

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