Bini, Daniela. *Carlo Michelstaedter and the Failure of Language*. Gainesville: U of Florida P, 1992. Pp. xiii, 308.

Although Italian critics have been well aware of his importance (Bini's bibliography cites about seventy Italian-language entries), Carlo Michelstaedter is a relatively obscure author in the North American context (Bini's bibliography cites only four studies dealing explicitly with Michelstaedter's works). Among specialists of the modern Italian lyric, this name is generally associated with the poetry of the 'vocianti'—a list that includes Sbarbaro, Boine, Jahier, and Rebora, among others. Reflecting its status as that of a "minore", the poetry of Michelstaedter is not always anthologized. While his compositions appear in Anceschi's *Lirica del Novecento* (1963) and Pecora's *Poesia italiana del Novecento* (1990), they are entirely excluded from Mengaldo's *Poeti italiani del Novecento* (1981) and Gioanola's *Poesia italiana del Novecento* (1986).

Daniela Bini's volume is especially significant because it is the first full-length, English-language study of Michelstaedter's literary output, of which his poetry is only one component. Bini succeeds in constructing an intelligent and extensive critique of a complex figure whose meteoric and intense life (he committed suicide in 1910 at the age of twenty-three) and work interacted not only with the vocian movement and the early modern Italian lyric, but indeed with Existentialist philosophy and artistic Expressionism—in a word, with Modernism. Bini's text comprises three major divisions or chapters (in addition to a Biographical Note, an Introduction, an Epilogue, and a Critical Bibliography), each devoted to an exploration of one of Michelstaedter's creative activities: namely, his philosophical writings, his poetry, and his art (drawings and sketches).

The first chapter, entitled "The Failure of Philosophy," is primarily an analysis of the author's philosophical speculations, with the focus of Bini's comments being Michelstaedter's doctoral dissertation, "*La persuasione e la retorica*." In leading up to Michelstaedter's theory, Bini reviews philosophical thought, from the pre-Socratics to Schopenhauer, pertaining to the distinction between *being* and *becoming*—the latter posited as the transitory, unstable forms of existence; the former as the eternal, unchanging absolute. She writes: "In the absolute and immutable world of *being* discourse is not possible," thereby alluding to the title of her text. Paraphrasing various philosophers, Bini goes on to equate *being* with *persuasione* and *becoming* with *retorica*. The origins of this split, Bini argues, coincide with the work of Aristotle, whose systematization of human knowledge produced artificial and, therefore, inauthentic, constructs "by which man deceives himself, giving names to darkness and nothingness."

Michelstaedter's ideas on the subject are set out in his dissertation and are supported by comments contained in his *Epistolario*, which Bini quotes frequently. The distillation of Michelstaedter's thought consists in a perceived split between the temporal and the eternal, the relative and the absolute, the inauthentic and the authentic. The existence of the one negates the existence of the other. *Persuasione* can be achieved only through the elimination of *retorica* and language is invariably *rettorica*: "*persuasione* cannot be achieved unless it annuls life itself." Paradox, as one can see, is at the very heart of Michelstaedter's thought and his life is dominated by the realization that, in order to possess existence in its quintessential form, he must transcend that same life: "to make himself an absolute being is to negate himself." The logical consequences of this *persuasione-rettorica* dichotomy is the rejection of all man-made knowledge: "There is no objective knowledge, nothing exists outside the knowing subject." Bini skillfully illustrates

the indebtedness of Michelstaedter's thought to Leopardian pessimism, identifies points of intersection with Pirandellian relativism, and suggests boldly that Michelstaedter's interrogation of the reliability of knowledge as well as the truthfulness of language anticipates Derridian deconstruction.

Having established the intellectualized antithesis of *persuasione* and *rettorica*, Bini, in the second chapter entitled "The Trial of Poetry," pursues Michelstaedter's relentless but futile attempt to attain the state of grace (*persuasione*) along the path of poetic discourse: "perhaps only art can give *persuasione* a proper form of expression." By exploiting recurring images such as the sea and the flame, which relate the poetic compositions to the philosophical writings through intertextuality, Bini traces the poet's desperate quest for authentic existence. Blending biographical fact, references to the poet's letters (which provide information as to the circumstances of writing, as well as the poet's state of mind at given moments), and critical analysis, Bini provides a plausible and effective reading of many of Michelstaedter's poems, following a more or less chronological order. Reiterating many of the views expressed by Michelstaedter critics such as Campailla, Bini succeeds in placing the poetry within the vocian context on the strength of the poet's almost obsessive anti-rhetorical stance. Bini's interpretation, following as it does the arguments of the preceding chapter, gives the concept of anti-rhetoricalness a new meaning—which enhances the conventional one. Bini tells us: "through poetry Michelstaedter continued the philosophical inquiries of his prose writings, hoping to avoid the traps of *rettorica* . . . Yet, the very use of language would make his task futile."

In addition to producing an extremely coherent reading of the poems, along the *persuasione-rettorica* axis established earlier, Bini provides excellent translations of many of the poems cited from Michelstaedter's *Poesie* (1974). The critical commentary centres on the poet's pursuit of imagery that conveys the quest for total and genuine *being*. The search for the "sea without shores" is destined to end in failure. Just as philosophical discourse falsifies life by failing to capture *being*, so too poetic discourse disappoints since it can articulate precisely the human longing for the absolute without making it attainable. Bini correctly argues that Michelstaedter's place in the context of the modern Italian lyric is assured by virtue of the poet's awareness of the fact that "poetry must give voice to the essence of things, totally stripped of any rhetorical embellishment." In this, the poetry of Michelstaedter anticipates the thrust, if not the form, of much twentieth-century Italian verse. Understanding the philosophical underpinnings of this process is essential to a proper assessment of the role played by Michelstaedter's poetry in the development of a truly modernist lyric in Italy.

The last of the three major chapters of Bini's study is called "The Authenticity of Drawing" and its connection with the two chapters that precede is made explicit from the outset. Sensing that poetry is unable to achieve "*persuasione*" because it is still language and all language is artifice, Michelstaedter sought immediacy in the graphic medium, hoping to erase the barrier between expression and reality, between truth and distortion. Bini identifies the correlation between his poetry and his art in these terms: "his drawings are the symbolic images of his poems." Bini's examination of the Michelstaedter sketches (mostly caricatures) is conducted in terms of the criteria of the German Expressionists and of Pirandello—whose artwork has been studied by Alessio, as Bini points out. "Michelstaedter shared with Expressionism the craving for the essential expression and the anti-rhetorical statement." As for Michelstaedter's relationship with Pirandello, Bini notes: "Michelstaedter's caricatures are the embodiment of Pirandellian *umorismo*." In attacking all forms of objective knowledge Michelstaedter aligns himself with Piran-

dellian relativism. Tying this section neatly with the other sections, Bini differentiates between the figures that are intended to signify *rettorica* (spiritual death) and those that symbolize *persuasione* (true self-fulfillment). "This is clearly what Michelstaedter was striving for: that authentic expression he had never captured in all his linguistic attempts."

Bini's "Epilogue" flows logically and predictably from the hermeneutical premises established early in the text and are reiterated and elaborated throughout. In the entire study, Bini emphasizes the impossibility of attaining *persuasione* in life and her ample quotes from Michelstaedter's letters illustrate well the poet's growing frustration, desperation, and frequent meditations on suicide. In the "Epilogue," Bini discusses the significance of the poet's final act and the validity of interpretations of that act as the inevitable conclusion to a failed existence.

Overall, it would appear that the book's strengths are also its weaknesses. In coherently tracing the *persuasione-rettorica* dialectic throughout the life and writings of Michelstaedter, Bini runs the risk of overstatement and restatement of a fundamental paradox identified in the first chapter. The tautness of the interpretive line persuades, but it also excludes readings not accommodated by her theoretical/thematic axis; this is especially true in the case of the chapter devoted to the poetry of Carlo Michelstaedter. Also, Bini's meticulous citing of biographical fact and details contained in the poet's correspondence corroborates her contentions; however, it also tends to create variability in the critical tone of the text; in other words, the discourse varies from the intensely philosophical or analytical to the relatively mundane.

Nevertheless, despite the few limitations mentioned in the previous paragraph, *Carlo Michelstaedter: The Failure of Language* constitutes a valuable monographic study of the work of a Rimbaud-like figure whose distrust of language is more topical today in the context of postmodernist deconstructive discourse than it was in 1910 when Michelstaedter chose absolute silence over problematical rhetoric.

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Kroha Lucienne. *The Woman Writer in Late-Nineteenth-Century Italy. Gender and the Formation of Literary Identity*. Lewiston-Queenston-Lampeter: The Edward Mellen Press, 1992. Pp. 167.

The Fall 1992 issue of *Il Gonfaloniere* reported that among the voices opposing the formation of a women's caucus of academics in Italian Studies was one which queried: "Why not a caucus for children, fat people, miners, farmers, politicians, cats, dogs, etc.?" (2). By giving Derridean privilege to this question, we forget, perhaps, the absent question of this binomial; namely, "Why a caucus for women?" In this recent volume, Lucienne Kroha gives the reader an abundance of material with which to formulate a most convincing answer. In addition, Kroha asks a few questions of her own.

The focus of this book is on four women writers (Neera, Matilde Serao, Marchesa Colombi and Sibilla Aleramo) whose careers encompassed the years between 1880 and 1920. In the last chapter the subject changes to a male writer, Luigi Pirandello, who writes *Suo marito* from what he considers to be a female point of view. Curiously, *Suo*