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The Michelstaedter Enigma

Thomas Harrison

If ever there was one who, in Nietzsche’s words, was born posthumously it was Carlo Michelstaedter. And doubly so: The first birth was a natural one, which for a variety of reasons he experienced as death. The second was the result of critical “exhumations,” repeated discoveries of his work in the decades that have ensued since his suicide in 1910. The most recent phase of this second coming begins when his sister Paula dies in 1972 and bequeaths Michelstaedter’s manuscripts and paintings to her son Carlo Winteler. He, in turn, donates them to the Biblioteca Civica di Gorizia, where an archive is promptly established as the Fondo Michelstaedter. Two years later Professor Sergio Campailla takes over the task of putting order into the works, and the complete writings of Michelstaedter begin to be published by Adelphi Edizioni in Milan. His drawings, paintings, and biography also come to light. Campailla himself writes three definitive studies of the unusual artist.¹

In the wake of the impressive advances of the Fondo Michelstaedter, now directed by Dr. Antonella Gallarotti, a question confronts all those who work in the field of modern Italian: Is Michelstaedter truly a figure of singular artistic stature or just an interesting anomaly? Is he part of our century’s cultural fodder or can we bypass his work without any significant loss?

The enigmas embedded in the Michelstaedter phenomenon make these questions all but unavoidable. He is not only an Italian, but also a Jew and, by citizenship, an Austro-Hungarian. He is as much of a painter and a poet as a philosopher. A great celebrator of life, he is also the consummate nihilist of Western history. As philosophers like Croce and Gentile recognized in the twenties, the celebrated work Michelstaedter wrote as a dissertation for the Università degli Studi di Firenze (La persuasione e la rettorica, finished literally on the eve of his death at age twenty-three) is anything but systematic.² It proposes, but describes it in a way that is impossible to practice. Michelstaedter demands that his life live up to his thought, but respects no thought not already spontaneously prompted by life. He inveighs against the temptations of rhetoric in one of the most rhetorical pieces of writing we have. Advocating independence of mind, he bases his arguments on classical sources. Insisting that knowledge is relative to the knower, he postulates universal, independent, metaphysical truths. Finally, while expressing an overweening contempt
for language, he takes his words seriously to the point of being ready to sacrifice literally everything for them.

To make matters worse, Michelstaedter denies us the aesthetic, reader's distance we are used to enjoying. His categorical, moralizing descriptions of life force us to decide at once: either he is right or he is wrong. We cannot assimilate his views without changing our thinking. Scoffing at everything most people accept when not living intellectually, Michelstaedter obliges us to consider whether we can find a place for his radical positions in the pictures we have already built of the world. And this, too, is why the question of his contemporary relevance must be addressed directly.

To a great extent, this question is already answered by the very nature of the most recent Michelstaedter readings. They show 1) that Michelstaedter has acquired international dimensions and 2) that he has been deeply assimilated into important debates of contemporary philosophy. Three readings in particular—among ten or so book-length studies that have followed Campailla's work—bring these two dimensions of the Michelstaedter renaissance into high relief: Daniela Bini's *Carlo Michelstaedter and the Failure of Language*, the articles published in the pages of *Differentia* by the philosopher Mario Perniola, and the two essays by another of Italy's most eminent philosophers, Massimo Cacciari, in his recent French collection, *DPAN*. Bini's study is the most complete and contextualized monograph to date (and the first in English) on the entire extent of Michelstaedter's artistic achievements. Cacciari's and Perniola's studies show manners in which Michelstaedter's thinking has been appropriated by contemporary philosophy. In one way or another, all future interpretations of Michelstaedter will have to pass through these three decisive recuperations. Here I want only to initiate this passage, suggesting additional byways in the process.

In the face of the interpretive difficulties attending the work of Michelstaedter, Daniela Bini's sensitive treatment of this figure in her recent book comes as a remarkable achievement. It covers the full range of issues attending Michelstaedter's work; it preserves unflinching aplomb in the face of his paradoxes; it reads as an elegant narrative, recounting each twist and turn in Michelstaedter's artistic, biographical, and spiritual development. Most important, perhaps, it performs precisely that act of contextualization which Michelstaedter requires of his audience, convincingly demonstrating the numerous ties between his work and that of towering figures of our spiritual tradition (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle; Heraclitus and Parmenides; Buddha and Christ; Leopardi and Pirandello). Here is an extraordinarily complete vision of Michelstaedter in European context, providing not only exemplary treatment of the difficult arguments of *La persuasione e la rettorica* but also in-depth analyses of his poetry and visual...
art. In fact, Bini’s study will remain a model and primary source for those who would engage in any detailed examination of Michelstaedter’s artistic work. Both on the visual and the literary front, it offers a consistently acute commentary to the numerous contributions of this “comet in the sky” of early twentieth century Italian art.

Bini’s assessment of Michelstaedter’s importance is strongly affirmative. His philosophy is given eminent credit, likened not only to his great pre-Socratic models, but also to the two masters of our century, Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. His drawings and paintings are compared to those of the commanding Expressionists, Oscar Kokoschka, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and Erich Heckel. His poetry is illuminated by references to Eugenio Montale.

The concluding sentence of Bini’s panoramic study brings Michelstaedter directly within the purview of issues with which we, in the United States, are particularly at home: issues of linguistic negativity and difference associated with a whole line of thinkers from Georges Bataille to Jacques Derrida, from Maurice Blanchot to Emmanuel Levinas. “It is not too farfetched to state,” writes Bini, “that Blanchot’s *L’écriture du désastre* and even Bataille’s central idea of the insuperable *différence* of the negative had their conscious sacrificial victim in Carlo Michelstaedter” (268). The dust cover of the book foregrounds the connection, introducing Michelstaedter as “a forerunner of Blanchot, Bataille, and Derrida.” Granted, these are the publisher’s words, not the author’s, but it is still clear that Bini gives Michelstaedter a privileged place in what we can call, in the broadest philosophical sense, the twentieth-century critique of the logocentric tradition.

Michelstaedter’s place in this critique relies on the opposition between the key terms of his dissertation: *persuasion* and *rhetoric*. In Bini’s reading, persuasion is akin to the existentialist notion of authenticity. To be persuaded is to act in accordance with the true nature of our being, to say and do only what we really believe, to commit ourselves first and foremost to the reality of our deepest, most inalienable self. Rhetoric, on the other hand, encompasses the mass of practical and theoretical procedures, concessions, and delusions informing the greater part of all cognitive traffic—whether the scientific belief in fact, the self-rationalizing ethics of business and pleasure, or the simple faith that life can be properly reflected in the understanding.

What would seem to account for Michelstaedter’s contemporaneity (if not postmodernity) is his vision of both the ubiquity and the inadequacy of all such rhetoric. Hope though we may to translate persuasion into principles, systems, or practical suggestions, it is entirely off-limits to words—to rhetoric. Persuasion, writes Bini, is “not an intellectual category, but a moral category. It belongs to the realm of
ethics, and it cannot be explained” (33). And again, “The nature of persuasion is, in fact, its very unspeakability . . . it cannot be known but must be lived” (35-36). On the surface, then, Michelstaedter’s recognition of the unspeakability of all foundational matters puts him squarely in the company of the great thinkers of our century. But still, there is a difference between Michelstaedter and many of these others. He truly believed in the autonomous reality of this essential persuasion; others saw persuasion as a function of rhetoric, a delusion invented by words.

At this point the question arises whether this elusive and apparently inexpressible idea of persuasion names anything different from the final topic of speech and religion since time immemorial (the true nature of being and moral commitment, the real and not the apparent order of things). Whether called truth or persuasion or the absolute (and whether reserved for the seer, the saint, or the angel), it seems to have been theorized incessantly in human history. Michelstaedter himself “articulates” it with vatic insistence, sometimes even suggesting that the communication of persuasion is the sole hope for salvation. The hero of persuasion speaks to people “in the voice of their own pain, a voice distant to them.” Each word of the persuaded hero is “luminous” and “creates the presence of that which is distant” (PR: 88).

From Parmenides to Henri Bergson, the dream has been one and the same: a non-rhetorical world of meaning, identity, and being. If this is logocentrism, then Michelstaedter is one of its most adamant proponents of the last two thousand years. Here, at least, nothing could be further from the deconstruction of linguistic metaphysics which marks our era. Michelstaedter’s resolution, in his own words, is “to give back to words their original meanings” (20). If Christ and Socrates offer models of persuasion, it is partially, Bini explains, because “they alone did not entrust their thought to the written word” (20).

The idea of persuasion itself does not grow more persuasive when placed off-limits to language. It does not become more vibrant when identified with the miracles of organic vitality. Radically different from the modes by which life typically forces us to operate, notes Bini, “persuasion seems not to belong to men” (24); even so, it is men who have devised the notion, and in countless articulated forms, some sacrificing their lives to it, others arguing that it can be achieved in the speechless purity of passionate, spontaneous action. Michelstaedter even appears to suggest that persuasion might have been more the rule than the exception before philosophers like Plato chose to separate theory from practice (Jean-Jacques Rousseau would have cast the fateful date back earlier). Michelstaedter’s Socrates is precisely an example of how such persuasion can belong to men. And this, com-
ments Bini, is because “Socrates’ theoretical and ethical goals coincide; his life was the enactment of his theory. He was a real persuaso” (26).

Today, after decades of phenomenological thinking (inaugurated in the very years in which Michelstaedter was writing his dissertation), one wonders whether his distinction between theory and practice is the most useful way to understand the structure of human experience. Now it appears more likely that practice is always motivated by theory in some way or other—always dependent on vision, intention and purpose, even in animals. Theory, too, appears always to serve some practical interest. If anything, a pressing intellectual task today is that of embracing the interconnections of the terms, discovering a way to conceive of the complexities of human behavior outside of the difference or separation.

Assuming, however, that occasionally this spontaneous, undifferentiated fusion of theory and practice is mercifully accorded to experience (in ecstasy, savagery, and Zen), the problems still linger. To what extent does it make sense to extrapolate from this experience of unity, as Michelstaedter does, a “one”, fundamental state of being underlying the two-ness, three-ness, and thousandfold variety of more common, or “rhetorical”, experience? (Something like this question led one thinker of our century who was most truly inclined to mysticism, Martin Buber, to abandon the early monistic metaphysics of his Daniel, 1913, for the dialogical historicity of I and Thou, 1923.) Besides, when philosophers and moralists have called for a correspondence between theory and practice they have usually had in mind the capitulation of one to the other (more specifically, of practice to theory). Noble as the intention may be, one would also like to see the operation moving, for once, in the opposite direction (making theory answer to practice). Here Michelstaedter remains regretfully on the far side of the fence.

Understood as ethical authenticity, persuasion has difficulty disengaging itself not only from the idea of theoretical truth (i.e., the intuited or experienced true nature of being) but also from the idea of a self-governing subject. The authentic, autonomous person to whom Michelstaedter advises us to conform our behavior now appears to be more a fiction abstracted from all the contingencies ordinarily considered constitutive of selfhood: cultural tradition and prejudice, learning and historical fortune, winding existential ways, the existential instabilities of care, emotion, and fear. Michelstaedter condemns all of these components of identity as rhetorical additions, whisking his hero away into the ethereal zones of divine self-standing: The persuaded self is one who “must create himself and the world, which does not exist before him: he must be master and not slave in his house” (PR: 73). And this belief in authentic self-making is another reason why Michelstaedter is not as deconstructive as he often seems. He never accepted the “ambivalence” (21) of that historical rhetoric in which all
existence is caught, that hermeneutical reading and writing of life which is complicitous with—if not responsible for—every intellectual ideal. If he had truly accepted the ambivalence of rhetoric, as Bini claims, the story she recounts would not hold half as well as it actually does.

The story is a compelling one, beginning with Michelstaedter the philosopher and ending with the poet and artist. In writing La persuasione e la retorica, Michelstaedter runs up against a tragic paradox that he cannot escape without abandoning his own vehicle of communication: conceptual reason can never bridge the distance that separates it from the absolute it strives to articulate. This paradox, in turn, revalorizes Michelstaedter’s work in poetry and drawing, those activities which have generally been ranked second to his thinking. Bini, however, sees them, and not the dissertation, as the genres in which Michelstaedter invested his greatest resources. We know, for example, that the concepts of philosophy struck him as “dead bodies without souls” (10). Poetry, by contrast, extended the promise of a “synthetic image; the image that does not explain, but evokes; the image that does not claim the assent of theoretical reason, but hopes for that of the feelings, through which truth can often speak with a more effective voice” (10). At the very end of Michelstaedter’s trajectory—away, that is, from the sterility of language—lie his portraits of living individuals. It was in these hundreds of sketches “that Michelstaedter was to find his authentic form of expression, the means by which he could finally defeat rettorica. With pencil or black chalk, the simplest of tools, he could try to catch the fleeting spark of the soul and with rapid strokes fix it on paper” (10). The culminating chapter of Bini’s book, examining Michelstaedter’s work in that visual medium where “between the subject portrayed and the beholder there is no longer any rhetorical mediation” (10), is appropriately called “The Authenticity of Drawing.”

Here, too, a deconstructive sensibility would have to ask: If the division between signs and meanings is as absolute as Michelstaedter claims it is, would it not apply to drawing as well? Doesn’t even a visual representation give us only the body of a person, not the soul (or the image of a body, the projection, as it were, of one “I” onto another)? If Michelstaedter had truly accepted the ambivalence of rhetoric, he might have had no ground at all for privileging drawing over writing, for both operate equally under the sway of the sign—revealing and hiding at once. That “communication from within” (216) at which Expressionist artists aimed is as impossible to achieve in drawing as in philosophy.

Nevertheless, Bini is certainly right about Michelstaedter’s attraction to the sketch. There is a sense in which the portrait tries to lay hands on the living core of an individual in a way that philosophy
generally does not (over and beyond the efforts of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and the dialogical Plato). It is also true that an artistic arrangement of signs can overcome the stereotypical associations of those signs themselves, especially the associations accruing to the semantics of speech. But here the question is simply this: How committed was Michelstaedter to exploring such arrangements? His poetry is not Dino Campana’s or Giuseppe Ungaretti’s. It is not visionary or hermetic, but conceptual and cerebral, often rawly allegorical, articulated in many of the same terms as his philosophy:

Io son solo, lontano, io son diverso—
altro sole, altro vento e più superbo
volo per altri cieli è la mia vita . . .
Ma ora qui che aspetto, e la mia vita perché non vive,
perché non avviene?
Che è questa luce, che è questo calore,
questo ronzar confuso, questa terra,
questo cielo che incombe? M’è straniero
l’aspetto d’ogni cosa, m’è nemica
questa natura! basta! voglio uscire
da questa trama d’incubi! la vita!
là mia vita! il mio sole!^8

I am alone, distant, different—
another sun, another wind
my life is a prouder flight through other skies...
But it is here, now, that I wait,
my life, why does it not live,
why does nothing happen?
What is this light, this heat,
this confused buzzing, this earth,
this sky which hangs so heavily above us?
The appearance of things
is strange to me;
An enemy to me, this nature,
Enough! I want to go, to escape
this nightmare plot which is life!
My life! My sun!

[translated by Elizabeth Pallitto]

While these may not be his most fortunate lines, even when considering Michelstaedter’s poetry as a whole we find that it rarely embodies persuasion (as art presumably would, in a classical unity of form and content). Instead, it speaks around it—and less persuasively in most cases than his prose.
And what of the idea that truth might speak more effectively in poetry, where it appeals to the feelings rather than reason? But if the entire polemic of *La persuasione e la rettorica* is directed against the irrationality and cowardice of feeling! Bini herself sometimes agrees with Campanilla that Michelstaedter committed suicide precisely because he was unable to tolerate the autonomy of his feelings (especially wrath, resentment, and guilt). One can even imagine a scenario in which the chronologically last Michelstaedter—the Michelstaedter of *La persuasione*, who limited his readings to the Gospels, Tolstoy, and a handful of moral, theoretical texts—argues that poetry is a spiritually immature form of expression, a language of emotional plaint rather than of firm and stable conviction.

Similar considerations can be applied to his drawings. The vast majority of them are caricatures—attacks on stereotypes, not positive, alternative visions. Instead of a coincidence of form and content, they represent a schism (a procedure Bini eloquently glosses by reference to Pirandello's *umorismo*, psychoanalytic theory, and the formal distortions of Expressionistic art). The suspicion remains that, up to the end, Michelstaedter never succeeded in lifting his art and his poetry above the conceptual deadlock of persuasion and rhetoric (which *did*, however, grow eloquent in *La persuasione*). He never succeeded in persuading himself of the persuasive power of these forms of rhetoric. (This is, of course, speaking of the whole; there are striking exceptions, where Michelstaedter shows himself as truly the equal of his artistic contemporaries, especially the portraits of himself and his family of the last three years. Not surprising, though, these are more than sketches.)

And this brings us to a question that no discussion of Michelstaedter is able to avoid, namely, the question of the final outcome of Michelstaedter’s spiritual journey, crowned by suicide. On the one hand, Bini recognizes that a literal commitment to persuasion can only be deadly. Michelstaedter “knows that to make himself an absolute being is to negate himself as a finite being, that to make himself an eternal being is to negate himself as becoming. Michelstaedter’s suicide seems at this point to have been a coherent and logical consequence” (39-40). On the other hand, she is not willing to interpret his death as an inherently philosophical gesture. Acquainted as few others with the torments by which Michelstaedter’s mind was racked, she interprets his suicide as probably a confession that he was unable to live up to his highest ideal of ethical unity. Here Bini takes issue with another, common reading of his suicide as a logical *exemplification* of the same ideal, or as a symptom of the nihilism inherent in persuasion itself. To believe in this unity of theory and act, writes Bini, is only “to fall prey to the systematic fallacy that mocks postmodernists” (259), namely, the assumption that since Michelstaedter insisted on an absolute coherence of theory and practice he must also have enacted
that coherence in his own, final gesture. While the objection is well
taken, one also wants to ask why we should want to deny
Michelstaedter such coherence at the one moment when he made the
most absolute decision of his life. To be sure, suicide is always an
admission that practice (life) is not conforming to theory. The signifi­
cant difference in Michelstaedter’s case is that his own theories left
him virtually no practical space in which to pursue the match. By con­
sidering persuasion something that practice could never live up to
(and insisting that there is no other value in life whatsoever)
Michelstaedter foreclosed all of his possibilities. In this sense his sui­
cide was plainly occasioned by philosophy (irrespective of what other,
concrete reasons might also have accompanied it, such as a quarrel
with his mother the morning of the act, or a lethal disease from which
he may have been suffering). In short, it is impossible to divorce
Michelstaedter’s suicide from the negative judgments he passes on life
at every turn. “There is no need,” he writes in La persuasione, “to con­
tinue a life which, wanting in everything, is revealed not to be life”
(70).

What would it have taken for Michelstaedter to continue to live?
Had he not chosen to believe that the absolute, the eternal, and the
true were the stuff of which life is made, the intolerable contradiction
of experience would have vanished—and, along with it, perhaps also
the suicidal temptation. But short of this, Michelstaedter would have
had to find a way to valorize the contradiction between rhetoric and
persuasion, the rhetorical failure of existence itself. Bini suggests that
silence was the inevitable consequence of his philosophical battle—
and silence is a stand-in for death. But one could also claim that only
there, where silence and death seem to be the only solutions to the
absurdity of experience, do art and life begin. Only there does one
assume personal responsibility for shaping meaning, for actualizing a
truly persuasive form of life. To continue to live Michelstaedter would
have had to cease railing against language, convention, and interpreta­
tion. He would have had to shift more of his energy toward the produc­
tion of art. His talents were so exceptional that he would have found
remarkable ways to lift his painting, poetry, and philosophy above the
phantoms by which they were haunted—to coerce them, as it were,
into a new type of vitality. Where negativity, duplicity, and rhetoric are
prime movers in the demand for meaning and life, there creativity
accepts its true challenge. Incidentally, Adriano Tilgher recognized
something of this in his review of La persuasione in La Stampa, 23
December, 1922, p. 3.

What emerges from Bini’s study of the full range of
Michelstaedter’s work is a sense that the relevance of his thinking
today ultimately hinges on how persuasive we find his Hauptbegriff—
the moral and intellectual ideal of persuasion. In an age where, to bor-
row Mario Perniola’s sardonic words, “everything seems to be reduced . . . to the daily tactical ministering of the spheres of feelings, interest, and ideas which appear to be obvious,” it is more difficult than ever to respond passionately to discussions of truth and unyielding commitment. We have become pragmatic through and through, cultivating only experiences and techniques we know to work. We humor only ideas we can translate into palpable results. It is in this type of setting that Perniola prescribes Michelstaedter as a curative. To do so, however, he must rethink the significance of persuasion.

For Perniola persuasion is not a condition in which the self becomes what it most inalienably is—immune, as it were, to the allure of rhetorical deceit. Persuasion is essentially *amor fati*, or love of fate:

In Greek, persuade, or convince, is *peitho*. Originally the root *peith-* was only intransitive: it did not mean to convince someone, but to have trust, or to trust someone. The transitive use of the verb does not belong to the ancient Greek and represents a later change. The fundamental meaning of persuasion is trust. To be persuaded thus means to have great trust, to be or remain in a state of trust. (5: 27-28)

Trust is not equivalent to the futural, messianic orientation of “faith”; it is a bearing toward “something already given, something present,” a condition of a person “who feels safe because he can rely on a solid reality” (5: 28).

This vision of persuasion sidesteps the tragic implications that Bini so carefully ferrets out from its textual descriptions. Gone are the speechless dilemmas, the beckoning of death, the self-immolations of Michelstaedter’s persuaded heroes. And this is primarily because Perniola is interested in Michelstaedter as a model for a new type of project, one radically different from the two caught up in the battle between modernism and postmodernism, idealism and pragmatism, the “sixties” and the “eighties” of our century.

The sixties and early seventies, claims Perniola, were modernist in demeanor: militant, revolutionary, and intent on the future, protesting the present in deference to social and political ideals. The eighties, by contrast, were postmodernist: *passeistès*, dispassionately immersed in what has already come to pass, disillusioning or entertaining as the case may be. The postmodernism of the eighties, writes Perniola, “oozes with boredom. This total acquiescence and consent to universal inconsistencies, and this state of misery, when it comes to emotions and feelings,” generates only flatness, emanating intellectual pretensions which somersault “in every direction” (3-4: 42). As we emerge from this postmodernist period, he claims, we may finally be able to grasp the “vitality and fecundity” of Michelstaedter’s thinking for the nineties. Very simply, it consists in his call for a “strong feeling” for the present—or what neither the sixties nor the eighties respected. Strong
feeling offers an alternative to activism and passivism alike, both equally evasive. In Michelstaedter’s idea of passionate commitment to what actually is at any moment, of trust in the phenomena composing historical presence, lies, for Perniola, the “point of departure of a new cultural tendency” (3-4: 41).

What is implied by this strong feeling for the present? To begin with: an overcoming of obnoxious, self-assertive subjectivity (though not in the manner of “sentimental Postmodern softness,” 3-4: 43). Perniola is almost alone in making an issue of Michelstaedter’s critique of vitalistic subjectivity—the notion that human motivation can be anchored in needs, desires, or lust for power. If subjectivism means acting in accordance with some form of this psychological or biological substratum (including the primal, Cartesian consciousness of the “thinking I”), then Perniola is right: Michelstaedter is not a subjectivist. He wants people to be absorbed in things. “Persuasion,” he writes, is “wanting to possess oneself in the things and in the things oneself” (qtd. 3-4: 44, though the citation is not exact: “veder oggetti-vamente . . . è l’estrema coscienza di chi è uno colle cose, ha in sé tutte le cose: . . . il persuaso: il dio,” PR: 123). This externalized type of identity gives rise to a new immediacy of being, both phenomenologically and temporally, experienced quite humbly in listening to “that which emerges from the present, to that which is coming (sopraggiunge) hic et nunc, and to that which is manifested in things” (3-4: 43).

This non-subjective feeling for temporal, phenomenological presence spills over into new types of commitment. One enters the “age of the thing” which ensues the postmodern “age of the image” by being a “high profile intellectual” (3-4: 47). Strong feeling issues into strong writing. In the nineties, strong writers replace the weak writers of the eighties as well as the maîtres à penser of the sixties. Not authors or intellectuals in the classical sense, they are gatherers of traces, bearing witness to experience not in exclusively authorial forms but also in non-authorial ones (iconographic documentations, the intellectual’s library, tomb, and so on). In essence, a high-profile intellectual is not a subject at all but “a thing,” entering into “direct contact . . . between thought and the world of history” (3-4: 46, 49). Silencing all “inordinate affections,” desires, and opinions, this new type of thinker may even be more of a reader than a writer, making “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” (3-4: 49).

The time for such non-subjective intellectuals is certainly long overdue. And yet, it is unclear how much sustenance they will find in Michelstaedter’s example. He admittedly defends valuing the exclusive reality of single instants of experience. As for whether there is any experience left to such instants, however, or whether he values the
phomena they make present—this is another story. Michelstaedter radically rejects the worth of everything we ordinarily think of as characterizing experience: the temporal progression of things, their perishing and changing, their foot in the past and their step to the future. While he seems to recommend viewing every occurrence as “once and once only,” there is, in his work, no love of experience which supports an analogous stance in Rilke or Nietzsche, no verbal or visual celebrations of the wonders of unrepeatable presence. In fact, one can hardly imagine a more widespread condemnation of life as it appears (as it comes “to presence” on the human and organic level) than we find in this fiery antagonist of desire and need, of affection and adaptation, of dependence and insecurity. In Michelstaedter’s view, everything for which humans ordinarily live amounts to nothing. Moreover, all this nothing is a cowardly compensation for the dread of that nothing which truly is at any moment of time. To commit to the present in the manner of Michelstaedter’s persuasion is also to commit to nothing. The nihilism which could have yielded amor fati is closer to amor vacui.

Even the apparent non-subjectivism of this presential feeling runs into resistance from Michelstaedter’s text, seeming more of a promise than a position his words decisively take. Though persuasion means having “nel possesso del mondo il possesso di sé stesso” (PR: 82), the emphasis remains much more strongly on the self than the world. A persuaded person, writes Michelstaedter, “cannot affirm himself in the affirmation of those [needs] which are given to him . . . by a contingency external and prior to him . . . he is alone in the desert, and must create everything on his own: god and country and family and water and bread” (PR: 70). Could it be that the goal of persuasion is a type of subjectivity after all, aiming “to affirm the person who possesses reason” (PR: 85)? Life must consist in “creating everything by oneself [da sé, which also means “out of oneself”], not adapting to any way . . . you have to create each thing: in order to possess your life as your own. . . . Christ saved himself because out of his own mortal life he was able to create the god: the individual” (PR: 103-04).

While Perniola’s strong, non-subjective feeling allows for the experience of what is distant, “foreign, other, different” (3-4: 44), in Michelstaedter this otherness is entirely generated from one selfsame self, now dilating to encompass the entire universe (a universe not composed of specific differences, but a limitless expanse of estrangement, in which all cows and cats are black). The seeming “disappearance of the subject” is thus at bottom a “possession of oneself” (3-4: 44, 46), of oneself as pure spirit. This new philosophy of presence now appears to have more in common with the visions of saints and ascetics than with empirical love. As Bini has noted, Michelstaedter’s sympathies are deeply Buddhistic (124-25, 245-28).

Perniola’s strong feeling 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” (3-4: 48). How can we place his Michelstaedter back to back with the view presented by the very figure alluded to in the phrases “negative thought” and the “crisis of reason”—Massimo Cacciari? We can, I believe, if we tie the positivity of Michelstaedter’s professed ethic more closely to the negativity of his metaphysics. In his second essay for Differentia, Perniola makes this negativity more explicit than in the first. There he characterizes persuasion as a paradoxical convergence of movement and immobility. In the “radical extraneousness [of experience] from which it is impossible to escape,” the persuaded self does indeed aspire to absolute autonomy and self-sufficiency (5: 27). The “liveliness and exteriority” of persuasion is necessarily and intimately tied to a descent into the abyss of one’s innate insufficiency. And thus, the self-energizing process of “becoming a flame” is ineluctably a “becoming stone,” and articulates an enigmatic “synthesis of sensitivity and coldness” (5: 29).

What Perniola calls the enigma of Michelstaedter, Cacciari calls his aporia. One of the most single-minded philosophers of the absolute in recent memory (where the “absolute” is understood as the original and impossible object of philosophy and religion, the shapeless, unspeakable goal of every concerted linguistic effort), Cacciari finds in Michelstaedter the same battle which is so often played out in the Habsburg culture to which the young philosopher belonged.11 With Cacciari we are closer to Bini’s reading than Perniola’s. Here the opposition between, let us say, the one “true” way of persuasion and the many ways of discursive deception is so radical that the very notion of unifying theory and practice becomes unthinkable. Persuasion is not only “para-doxical,” it is also para-physis, writes Cacciari in the second of his two Michelstaedter essays.12 Socrates, the persuaded one, is “atopos”; what he says “cannot take root” (102). The insuperable difference of persuasion that is built into the duplicity of peithò: a divine peithò on the one hand and the oscillating peithò of mortals on the other, ineluctably governed by the built-in requirements of social and political interaction (98). For Cacciari, Michelstaedter severs the two voices of peithò in primordial fashion. No longer can there be any question of actualizing persuasion in feeling or unified action. Between operari and the True Way, between work and health, remains an incommensurable distance. In truth what a person enacts in persuasion is nothing less than the immanent desert of the soul, or the silence of the very ground of the soul. “He wants to be autarkès .... he knows no Other to whom to address himself” (108).

Persuasion thus takes up its place in the history of that tragic spirituality which runs from Aeschylus’s Agamemnon to the absurd Christianity of Kierkegaard. La persuasione appears to be a unique
effort to reconcile pagan trust with Christian faith, *peithò* with *pistis* (107). Here Christ is far from a model for practicing what one preaches. Rather, Michelstaedter’s Christianity is all contained in the superhuman nature of the love it proposes, in the maniacal courage of the freedom it urges. “The Christian God does not contradict life but requires an impossible true life” (109). And Michelstaedter’s aporia becomes that of “having to want the true Way, being able only to want it, and not being able to have it while wanting it” (110).

In Cacciari’s radical rhetoric (appropriate, I believe, to the fundamentality of the contradictions with which Michelstaedter is concerned) lies a final, essential perception. The bind involved in the will to persuasion is the experience of persuasion itself. The only enactment of persuasion lies in embracing its own impossibility. Cacciari sees this more clearly than others (and probably more clearly than Michelstaedter himself). To be persuaded is knowingly and willingly to suffer the impossibility of the condition itself. It is neither to dismiss the persuasive ideal as irrelevant to the pragmatic operations of the world nor to relegate it to philosophical theory. Rather, it is to show the dream *in* its ineffability, to keep it sacrosanct, to allow it to mark the limits of all knowledge and intuition—in short, to voice its silence. This is the “most ancient” persuasion of life, around which words turn.

True life is not to be located in a Beyond that reason cannot attain; “true life, its perfection, is the accomplishment of this life: the impossible perfect satisfaction of its *erga*—to which no method can lead. Persuasion is the silence and peace of these words—and it reveals itself in them as the uncapturable ‘*dià logon*’” (110). In still another way, persuaded life does not lie in an abstract alternative to the “sick” life of pain, desire, and need; it consists in “the coincidence in process between a person’s existence and a radical endurance of the pain connected to this existence. The present of persuasion means being *en energhia* in pain, not beyond it” (82).

Perniola and Cacciari do not disagree in viewing persuasion as an existential response to the perfect imperfection of the historical process (no less than Bini does). If anything, they disagree about how to understand this process. Perniola emphasizes its phenomenal coming-into-being in an infinitely differentiated flow of autonomous things and appearances. Cacciari places the emphasis on its ontological difference: the unthinkable gap between its being. Or perhaps the real difference lies here: just what to make of this inherently duplicitous presence. Perniola envisions an ethical response of strong participation.13 Cacciari is primarily concerned with what the presence inspires in the way of vision, before the issue of ethics has even been raised.

In Cacciari’s reading, every expression of persuasion is antinomi-
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an (where nomos is the law, the rule, the doxa to which meanings are typically reduced). What is “unauthentic,” in other words, is not a particular use of language but language’s very constitution (72). The closest it can come to authenticity is to speak in recognition of its own futility. The most striking expression of this aporia (profusely revealed by the expressionist art of Michelstaedter’s time) is the “knowledge” that he found intolerable—namely, the sense that the greatest closeness to meaning is achieved by the greatest rhetorical distance. The keeper of language must be pulled by the hair.

When Virginia Woolf wrote that “in or about December, 1910, human character changed,” she had something like this fight in mind. She did not mean that human nature had become different, but that the conventions by which it had once been represented had now broken down. Like Michelstaedter, the writers of the first decade of the century were left facing a new type of “Mrs. Brown without any method of conveying her to the reader” (332).

Their suspicion her essence could not be depicted by a rhetoric of material or existential conditions explains the “breaking and falling, crashing and destruction” accompanying all literary efforts to rescue her from her material and linguistic entrapment (334). Thus, when confronting the art of the beginning of the century, Woolf advises, “we must reconcile ourselves to a season of failures and fragments. We must reflect that where so much strength is spent on finding a way of telling the truth, the truth itself is bound to reach us in rather an exhausted and chaotic condition.” Mrs. Brown, in other words, will appear a little pale and dishevelled by the time her rescuers reach her. And, in the proximity of this rhetorical rescue operation, it will be above all “the sound of their axes that we hear” (335-36).

This is the critical artistic moment which comes to expression in Michelstaedter (and which points ahead to an era in which crisis does not have to prove suicidal). Few artists make the sound of the axes as eloquent as Michelstaedter—in his conceptual dilemmas, in those drawings which Bini has brought to our attention, in the contortions of a style forged in prose. Among the lessons to be learned from the Michelstaedter of Bini, Perniola, and Cacciari today is also this one: that only in a redemption of rhetoric can the soul find its silent persuasion.

Notes


2. Giovanni Gentile's review of *La persuasione e la rettorica* appears in *La Critica* 20 (1922): 332-36. For Croce's review see the bibliography by Muzzioli cited above.


5. The idea of Michelstaedter as a precursor of Heidegger is first systematically argued, if not fully convincingly, by Ioachim Ranke, "Il pensiero di Michelstaedter: Un contributo allo studio dell'esistenzialismo italiano," *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana* 41, no. 4 (1962): 518-39. Additional links are explored by La Rocca, Brianese, and Cacciari in the studies cited above. Ties between Michelstaedter and Wittgenstein, also largely problematic in nature,
have been drawn not only by Bini but also by Cacciari and La Rocca as well as Gianni Carchia, "Linguaggio e mistica in Carlo Michelstaedter," Rivista di estetica 21 (1981): 126-32.

6. Carlo Michelstaedter, La persuasione e la rettorica, ed. by Sergio Campailla (Milan: Adelphi, 1982), 87. Hereafter citations from this text (abbreviated PR) will be identified parenthetically.

7. It is worth noting that on his list of countless deluded "types" who function rhetorically—scientists and shopkeepers, educators and athletes—Michelstaedter hardly finds room for priests and prophets.


9. Mario Perniola, "Beyond Postmodernism: Michelstaedter, Strong Feeling, the Present," Differentia 3-4: 40. References to this and Perniola’s other essay on Michelstaedter (fully documented in note 4) will henceforth be identified in parentheses, where the volume number of Differentia is followed by page numbers (thus, here, 3-4: 40).

10. Even in the inorganic realm of chemicals, the very principle of life (as expressed, for example, in the tendency of hydrogen to "lust" after chloride and thus form the lethal compound hydrochloride) is suicidal (PR: 46-47).


13. In Del sentire (Turin: Einaudi, 1991), Perniola elaborates at much greater length the aesthetic implications of this type of ethic.