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# A Conversation with Michael Heller: *This Constellation is a Name*

**Fiona McMAHON \***

## **ABSTRACT**

*Les réflexions réunies ici sont le fruit de deux conversations qui ont eu lieu à l'occasion de la venue du poète Michael Heller en France en 2013. L'accueil du poète par l'Université Toulouse II–Le Mirail en janvier 2013 et par l'Université Paris Ouest Nanterre en février 2013 fut un événement riche en échanges pour sonder l'inscription de son œuvre dans la lignée historique des poètes objectivistes et pour mettre en lumière sa place actuelle parmi les courants contemporains américains.*

**KEYWORDS:** Diasporic poetics; Contemporary American poetry; Lyricism; Experiment; Tradition.

This conversation with Michael Heller<sup>1</sup> follows upon the publication of his most recent volume of poems, *This Constellation is a Name: Collected Poems 1965-2010*, and the subsequent readings he was invited to give in France and in Great Britain during the winter of 2012-13. By way of entry, the weave between tradition and experiment is one pattern to follow as the diasporic consciousness underlying his poetics unfolds. His writing will just as soon delight in the vitality of the poet's eye in the world as in the mutability of the Word at the hand of the poet. Though suggesting modes of experiment along a transmigratory path, poetry for Michael Heller holds fast to a ritual ruled in equal parts by skill and desire. As he explains in his

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\* Université de Bourgogne.

<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted over the course of two events, one of which was held at the Université Toulouse II–Le Mirail (“Tailor-Made Traditions: The Poetics of U.S. Experimental Verse”, January 25, 2013) and the second, at the Université Paris Ouest Nanterre (“The Objectivists Today—a Seminar with Michael Heller”, February 8, 2013).

essay “Diasporic Poetics”, poetry is experienced as the endeavor “to gather two intimacies at once, that of the very things words named, the trees, the rocks, the persons and images, etc. and that of a renaming” (*Uncertain Poetries* 174). Against the background of discussions on experimental poetry, Heller’s volume, *This Constellation is a Name* brings to light a complex placing of intimacies. The reader is distinctly drawn to consider the nodes of thought, of feeling and of craft that comprise any one poem.

The gathering of poetry into a *constellation*, as the title suggests, means reflecting with the poet on the formation of language as though part of a network of experiments. For the contemporary poet, the circle widens to acknowledge and to query the relationship of language to the circumstance of history. If the poet never steps out of that circle, it is because he remains, as he is described, a “supplicant before words” (*UP* 173), a highly conscious player of sorts setting forth amongst the signs of language that others have inscribed before him. If we sift through the substantial body of work collected in this volume, we gain a sense of Michael Heller’s itinerary in and among words, and importantly, his itinerary alongside other writers. In his poems there are encounters with Apollinaire, Celan, Rilke, Mallarmé, encounters with George Oppen, Paul Blackburn, Carl Rakosi, Robert Duncan, Walt Whitman, as well an enduring conversation with Walter Benjamin. The poet for Michael Heller, in the act of “re-naming” (*UP* 180) is something like the figure encountered in one such conversation-poem entitled “On a Phrase of Milosz’s”:

He has found vertiginous life again, the words  
on the way to language dangling possibility,

But also, like the sound of a riff on a riff,  
it cannot be resolved. History has mucked this up. (*TCN* 387)

Constellations emerge with Michael Heller as a bastion of possibility in spite of the impediments that history has thrown across the path of language. This latest volume, stretching over a period from 1965 to 2010, exposes the poet continuously in the act of revisiting words, thus forming new constructs, new arrangements. This comprises his

task to ponder the loss of intelligibility and yet refuse solipsistic routes: “and if our words are off not by being/in another place but in a nowhere/of no help to ourselves or anyone,/if they are just stuff and the proof of stuff” (*TCN* 385).<sup>2</sup>

In response to the finality of a “nowhere” for language, there is a move to retain the potency of modalities that may foster, as Kenneth Burke once said in reference to Charles Reznikoff, a “usefulness to living” (xvi). These entail concentration on sight—on what may be reclaimed from the visible world—and concentration on language through efforts to fathom transmissibility. As we consider the matter of poetic allegiances and divergences that develop over time, Michael Heller’s relationship to the ideals and shapes of Objectivist poetry appears as one example of a lasting poetic companionship. What may not find its way into the present conversation, we can remember from the influential study *Conviction’s Net of Branches: Essays on Objectivist Poets and Poetry* (1985) and Michael Heller’s discussion of George Oppen’s poetry in his collection of essays, *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* (2008; 2012). Our conversation will touch upon this mapping of poetic practice, as it relates to Michael Heller’s involvement in European poetry and the contemporary American scene.

### **A conversation with Michael Heller**

**FM:** Your poem entitled “Poetic Geography” (*Eschaton* 2009) planted the seed for my first question. It pertains to the formation of what you have termed a “diasporic poetics” alongside the figures of geography generated in your writing. Reading the poems over the expanse of your volume *This Constellation is a Name*, we are carried along as though through the geography of your experience as a writer, many poems casting light on the different places where you have made your home or travelled through. At the same time, language appears contingent upon place as poems retrace the itinerary in and out of the myth encoded in an American landscape: “Lost./To be lost/in that old

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<sup>2</sup> “Looking at Some Petroglyphs in a Dry Arroyo Near a Friend’s House” (*Eschaton* 2009) in *TCN*, 385.

American hope//of words/enfolded in the continent” (TCN 424). Beyond these examples however, the mobility of your sympathies directs us beyond the limits of a place-specific poetics. I am thinking for instance of your ties to European culture and European places as defined through your Jewish cultural heritage. The reaction against the transparency of the word, which has defined much experiment in poetry since the latter half of the twentieth century (beginning perhaps with the Concretists) may also be tied to your heritage as a writer. What fascination do words, sometimes “enfolded in the continent”, continue to hold over writers today? Is geography a helpful or an adequate image to replicate the experience of language?

**MH:** First let me partially exempt myself from the strictures of being labelled “Jewish American”. I am a secular person, and any label such as “Jewish” or “American” has to do, as I mentioned in *Living Root*, with history and location and with others identifying me as “Jewish”, in other words, the label, as labels must, feels reductive. As you remark above, I hope I am working “beyond the limits of place-specific poetics”. On the other hand, and this is also partly historical (diasporic, cultural, even Shoah-related), some of the most profound writing I have encountered on attempting to understand the situation of being beyond place-specifics, on trying to grasp it, grasp it with respect to something fundamental about human beings, well, some of that writing has been, quite naturally, given their history and culture, written by Jews. When I say fundamental, I’m thinking of the comfort or discomfort in my mind of being locked in a place-specific context. Yves Bonnefoy wrote a remarkable little book on Rimbaud that I recently discovered in which he remarks that Rimbaud’s whole career as poet can be seen as trying to undo the rite of his baptism, his entrapment in a powerfully marked category or identity. Such an urge to undo possesses me, especially with respect to poetic and cultural categories.

We know, however—and who better to remind us than certain French writers—that the trace, if I may sound like O. J. Simpson’s lawyer, is there even as we attempt to erase.

To go back to your question of words: to my mind, any poetic “sublime”, the American Sublime (and the American “nuclear

sublime”, the subject of Rob Wilson’s book, which is why I dedicated the poem to him) represents an effort to render words superfluous to a vista, to a “vision”. The source of our so-called “American exceptionalism” lies there in its utter mutedness, in its anti-dialogical character. It is not to be argued or trifled with. As a thinking human being, not only as poet, I seek an erotics of words that forces them to be encountered again, to be dealt with. So really I have to say that no geography, no image of geography is sufficient to language, unless one buys into some sort of nationalism. That is why the narrator of the poem puts his hope in a vertiginous fall “homing/like a smart bomb/from signifier to signified/and there, oddly,/identifying/with a lover/instead of oneself.” But yes, as the poem goes on, this is something of a “Lost hope!”

**FM:** As Norman Finkelstein has suggested in his review of your volume, *This Constellation is a Name: Collected Poems 1965-2010*, the relationship between intellectual inquiry and lyricism has been a constant concern in your work (186-195). It is described not as a seamless binding but as a necessary dynamics of resistance enacted by the poet through language. In the same respect, your writing brings us to contemplate, after Wallace Stevens, “The poem of the mind in the act of finding/What will suffice” (239-240). Mindful of the past and yet seeking to write outside the “script”, as Stevens’ modern poet, the very act of writing becomes inseparable from an investigation of the world. Anticipating an approach diversely explored in the contemporary context, the investigative quality of poetry equates it to some extent with the logical rigors of philosophy. At the same time however, as you have suggested in your 1995 essay, “The Uncertainty of the Poet”, “the poet is caught in the secret knowledge of language, that it speaks not certainties but explores uncertainty [...]” (*UP* 25). In a manner that recalls your understanding of “diasporic motion” in poetry (*UP* 181), Henri Meschonnic has described language as “unquiet” and poetry as “the organization in language of what has always been said to escape language: life, the movement no word is supposed to be able to say” (*Rhyme and Life* 181). When I read this I think of the following lines from your poem “The Oath”, in a group entitled “Partitions” (*In the Builded Place* 1989; *TCN* 316):

Not the power of speech  
 Nor the note blown into wholeness.  
 We seemed never to converse in the now as now.

What poetry there is  
 Is always late. Strange merely  
 To have thought. ...

Has negation become a method of redefining language so as to become, in the end, a form of affirmation? If so, do you see this stance as part of the elegiac quality of your writing—inherited from the Romantic tradition? Do you join in with Stevens who writes in “Sailing after Lunch”: “It ought to be everywhere./But the romantic must never remain.”

**MH:** Oppen’s well known lines seem to bear here: “One can use words provided one treat them as enemies ... not enemies but ghosts that have run wild in the streets, etc.” I wrote an entire chapter in my book on Oppen based on that pause and then swerve in the poem from “enemies” to “ghosts”, and so the question has been not one of negation but of a kind of tuning into and exposing as articulation the haunting of language. “One by one”, writes Oppen or, as my friend Jonathan Morse entitled his book, “Word by word”. Admittedly, this has left me on occasion somewhat indifferent to some of the programmatic aspects of experimental poetry, though “word by word” is, as far as I am concerned, the most experimental as well as experiential modality, because it encompasses so much by way of possibility and is at root a sense of not quite knowing where you are going, but wanting “to cohere” (if I may be Poundian for a moment).

**FM:** To return to the notion of “uncertainty” or what you refer to with disarming simplicity as “lostness” in the same essay: “Perhaps all that a word can do is remind us that, in order to experience lostness or uncertainty, one has to remember when, whether for an instant or an eternity, something was ‘true’” (*UP* 24). In a different essay, “Notes on Lyric Poetry, or at the Muse’s Tomb”, you describe the lyric as a



“point of radical undoing” (*UP* 246). Once again a negative framework appears to paradoxically give rise to an opportunity for poetic production, for a form of renewal. Do you understand lyricism as an expression of “lostness”?

**MH:** I understand the human condition to be an expression of lostness. I don’t want to be esoteric, but, for instance, in the Buddhist tradition in which I studied (and the various traditions are by no means the same), the expression was not that “the world is an illusion”, but that “it was like an illusion”, characterizing our disorientation from both a grounding and a groundlessness simultaneously. When Oppen writes that “the miracle is not that we exist but that we have something to stand on”, I feel he confirms the endless duality of our situation in which the lyrical—“lyricism” sounds too musical theater for me—the breaking into the discursive constructs, opens up the possibility of seeing a path to freedom, momentarily at least. And you can sense, from what we have discussed here and our shared knowledge of some of these subjects, that Benjamin’s “now-time” was among the most seductive formulations of this range of ideas I was to come across. So, to answer your question, the lyrical “act” of the poet, can be the expression of “lostness”. I say this with caution, because the words lyric, lyrical, etc., have such horrible baggage. In my essay, “Notes on Lyric Poetry or at the Muse’s Tomb”, I tried to delineate what I meant by the word, but whether or not I could overcome in the reader the idea that I was not talking about “poesy”, I can’t know.

**FM:** I would like us to touch upon your exploration of memory with respect to your long-standing conversation with Walter Benjamin. In his tracing of the evolution of the “epic mind” since the example of the early Greeks, Walter Benjamin makes a distinction between how memory is made manifest by the novelist and by the storyteller. In the first instance, he speaks of the “perpetuating remembrance of the novelist” and in the second instance, the “short-lived reminiscences of the storyteller” (98). As a poet whose writing turns repeatedly to the agency of memory, how do you conceive of the “epic mind” (97) in the present day? What future is there for the “epic mind” if we live in

a period of “short-lived” memory and rapidly changing modes of communication? To quote from “After Class”, a poem that appeared in the 1989 volume, *In the Builded Place*: “I hear the dead leaves scrape my voice: history” (TCN 225). Is memory sounded out at a cost? Is it necessarily an antagonistic process?

**MH:** This question has an odd resonance with my answer above—the poem invokes Shelley again, which must indict me as some hapless Romantic who has not caught on to the change of rules. The Mr. Wolfgang of the poem, an aging German lawyer who had lived in Berlin during the Shoah, was, without meaning to be—this was back in the 1960s—a confrontational figure, one who stopped up my speech without any awareness, and certainly no animus. Memory, “the dead leaves” that I would not/could not query or mention, had its cost, which here was a kind of quietude. As Benjamin tells it, if we sit on the back of his angel of history, our view is a landscape of disasters, and whoever wishes to speak must overcome memory not by negating it but by being willing to speak through it. Poetry, as Aristotle insisted, could do this more accurately than “history”. It’s part of why I am in the game, so to speak.

**FM:** As a writer of prose, your ties to a chain of tradition, derived from your family and their Jewish cultural heritage come alive most vividly in your memoir *Living Root*. How does the task of poet align itself with that of the chronicler, the storyteller? In the poem, “The Chronicle Poet”, the process of telling is wracked with failure: “A noise seeking to reach/its fundament, trying, out of pure sound, to form itself/as honest language, and by that failure, painfully embarrassing” (TCN 401). What difference is ascribed to prose? Does it succeed where poetry fails?

**MH:** A tough question, which entails all the answers I tried to give above. I think such a question, however, no longer can be asked in a binary way, since the interpenetration of poetry and prose, the boundary markers of each, no longer are distinct. I have put this question to myself and in print more in terms of discourse as opposed to “lyric”, a word which I put in scare quotes lest someone think I’m

talking about Joyce Kilmer's "Trees" rather than a figured language that by leading a writer or poet on has something unplanned and unannounced about it. I would add that any number of writers who are designated as "philosophers" fall between the stools of our categorizations. "Pure language", a language supposedly having nothing else but the writer's pure intent died with Mallarmé's or Stevens's second and third level imitators. At best, to borrow from William Carlos Williams, we "tune" words by ordering them through our craft, for me the greatest pleasure of writing.

**FM:** Considering still your conversation with Walter Benjamin, it seems to me that as a writer you demonstrate how memory works as both an obstacle and a path to language. For instance, the memory of Benjamin's thinking is furthered through a defining, affirmative tonality in your 1989 poem, "Strophes from the Writings of Walter Benjamin" (*TCN* 241). At the same time, the poem appears to recognize to some degree the alienation of memory from language:

In shutting out experience,  
the eye perceives an experience  
of a complementary nature,

less the product of facts  
firmly anchored in memory

more a convergence in memory  
of accumulated facts,

the replacement of older narrations  
by information of sensation.

According to theory,  
fright's significance  
in the absence of  
of ready anxiety.

If poetry, as in this poem, reads as a search for a conduit of memory, could you briefly discuss the modality intimated in the phrase, “by information as sensation”? Does this relate with the Objectivist notion of “rested totality” or Carl Rakosi’s “hard/Inevitable quartz”.<sup>3</sup>

**MH:** Most of this poem comes right out of Benjamin’s essay on Baudelaire. The idea expressed is taken from Bergson and concerns the traumas embedded in memory. Benjamin’s “messianic shock” seems to devolve from this idea. History and its ideas both disguise and reveal the traumas enacted on mankind. The poet (or historical materialist) reads history to expose the traumas that can evoke the dynamics of hope and fear, of anger and political action. I think both Bergson and Benjamin see the “information” of history as provocative, hence as having the possibility of being experienced not merely as story but as affective and affecting language.

Pound, as you will recall, saw the “information” of history (in his case, examples and maxims) as having a similar power to affect politics and culture.

**FM:** You have discussed on various occasions the extent to which another Objectivist, George Oppen has been a shaping influence from the very start of your career. You emphasize for instance how Oppen presents a model of kinship between poetry and philosophy that has been important to you. This entails the poet being “caught between a philosophical sense of his or her craft and a religious sense of the mysteriousness of the world” (“The Uncertainty of the Poet” 24). At the same time, in your deeply perceptive review of the latest edition of Charles Reznikoff’s poems by Black Sparrow Books (“Dantean Reznikoff”), you discuss the activity of the poet in the context of modernism and a world emptied of symbolic and spiritual meaning. As such, you identify poetry as performing the role of witness in a world where there are no longer any “designs” with which to shape meaning:

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<sup>3</sup> “This is the raw data./A mystery translates it/Into feeling and perception;/Then imagination;/Finally the hard/Inevitable quartz/Figure of will/ and language” (“Shore Line”; *Amulet*).

Recording takes precedence over making; it can be likened to the act of the saint or bodhisattva, or to the Talmudist's insistence on living for others. One's own salvation or enlightenment is put off for the saving of other people. The artist puts off the self-display, the novelizing trick because what he or she has to say must be rendered with straightforwardness. (38)

Is the philosophic mode the only worthy "design" as the poet tries to navigate a course? How does your understanding of Buddhism find a place in this encounter between philosophic and religious thought amongst contemporary poets?

**MH:** Well, without quite having come to this question, it seems I have scattered a few answers to it above. First, let me say that Reznikoff is perhaps the ultimate poet-bodhisattva in both his writing and in his literary career as someone—how to put this except perhaps in terms of Keats's discomfort with poems that have a design on us—whose work is at once a power, a witness and a non-aggression. I don't know if that even begins to cover it, but it was what I wanted to imply when I first wrote about Reznikoff that he practiced "a modernity with a vengeance", the witness making us come to terms with what he has witnessed.

But let me not use the word "Buddhism" or its terminology too much. It leads to more misinterpretations and has much more baggage associated with it than "lyricism", and one finds that instead of what empowerment certain ideas have given one, that he or she is defending against all the misconceptions a word can entail. Suffice it to say that poetry exists, at least in one sense, to deconstruct philosophic ideas, and that the Buddhism I studied also seeks to deconstruct all sorts of ideas, including the idea of Buddhism itself.

**FM:** Writing in a world often labeled today as "post-religion" or "post-faith", do you feel such distinctions are relevant when describing objectivist writing? In their own time, though it may be difficult to generalize about such matters, did the Objectivists experience loss of faith as a crisis? Or was it quickly absorbed by a search for what you described as Oppen's search for an "adequate

language” (*Conviction’s Net of Branches* 86), the “truth-value of poetic speech” (*CNB* 81) or even by a readiness to humour? You mentioned an episode to me where you were invited with Reznikoff to read poems in a synagogue.

**MH:** Yes, it was on Yom Kippur at an Upper West Side temple. Part of the Day of Atonement service is to recount the history of the awful events visited on Jews. Reznikoff was going to read from “Holocaust”, and I was going to read from my “Bialystok Stanzas” about the Nazi burning of Bialystok’s synagogue and its congregants trapped inside.

Both of us arrived at the temple together and walked down the aisle to the front—and both of us, not exactly secular but not exactly observant—had not bothered to put on skull caps. So there we sat in the front row reserved for readers with two very conspicuous baldheads shining under the ceiling lights. Shortly the sexton in charge of keeping the congregation in order wandered down the aisle and proffered us the black skullcaps. We both shrugged at each other—a kind of Jewish shrug that implies a dozen things from being mystified to acquiescence—and donned the caps.

Something like this shrug has occupied my mind for years. I imagine in World War II the gesture was made by the Jews of Bialystok, made as they saw their long-time neighbors and friends suddenly turn on them. In fact, one of the pictures I used in writing “Bialystok Stanzas” had already been a record of just such an act: “The old man with the sack/Who has turned/Shrugs his disbelief into the lens” (*TCN* 142). It is a way of dealing with fate, with subjects like love and death, and history, of course, that don’t have “solutions” in any usual sense, subjects that are often taken up in poetry. But they do have verbal equivalents, which brings me to some lines by Oppen from “Route” that I have assented to, yet never resolved in my mind:

Imagine a man in the ditch,  
The wheels of the overturned wreck  
Still spinning—

I don’t mean he despairs, I mean if he does not

He sees in the manner of poetry (*NCP* 198)

**FM:** To return to the difficult question of mapping influences or allegiances... You spend and have spent a significant amount of time in Western Europe (Spain; France) and there are specific poems in *Wordflow* (1997) and *In the Buildded Place* (1989) that convey that experience. Does the past weigh more heavily on you as a poet when in Europe? To put it differently, does the present elude the poet more deftly? I'm thinking of your poem "Fifty-Three Rue Notre-Dame de Nazareth" (*TCN* 266) where you write:

While at best one writes  
The lightning's thunderclap:  
Not the event itself, but the event's  
Near after. Poet, this is the husk

Already burnt, the belated desiring  
Of an image on command,  
O not one's own, never one's own.

The poem, "Operation Cicero" also appears to thread this same theme, with its reference to WWII and to the deceit or the slipperiness of "idiom": "as the words/all go toward the sight/of secrets" (*TCN* 68).

Is the source of poetry for you (as you say of Charles Reznikoff) "less the bookshelf than the sidewalk" ("Dantean Reznikoff" (38)? Do you have a strong affinity for what may be termed deambulatory thinking?

**MH:** Are you an American poet, these two questions seem to ask? Of course, I am an American, have American tastes and interests, but I am not a post-Whitmanesque American, feeling a special duty to define our culture against another, or—horrid thought—to claim an exceptionalism for my country, which is a great country and often, in the quest for freedom and dignity, an ennobling country. Living in New York City, I love urban spaces, I love the layered thickness of history, of culture, so when I am in Europe, I experience its even more apparent thicker thickness as a great pleasure and resource.

As for ambulation, being a *flâneur* and being a poet seem very much like the same thing. I think of Rezi's great circumambulations, of Mandelstam's linking of Dante's *Commedia* to the tread of his feet, and the Baudelaire-Benjamin nexus as examples that animate me and get me away from my desk.

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