

MICHAEL HELLER IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

Uncertain Poetries. Michael Heller. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2005.
Exigent Futures: New and Selected Poems. Michael Heller. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2003.

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To this fond reader at least, everything most notable about Michael Heller's imagination comes together in his extraordinary poem "For Uncle Nat," appearing first in Heller's 1989 collection, *In The Built Place*, and again in Heller's New and Selected volume from Salt: *Exigent Futures*. *Futures* is joined just now by *Uncertain Poetries*, a collection of Heller's critical prose from the end of the eighties to present. The appearance of the two volumes together is certainly a watershed in Heller's career, as well as an opportunity for his readers to reconnoiter even well-remembered poems, like "Uncle Nat," in light of the poetics laid out, with powerful and erratic intelligence, in the volume of criticism.

"For Uncle Nat," an elegy inflected Jewish-American, locates itself on 20th Street in Manhattan where the speaker and his companion are passing Congregation Zichron Moshe when a man beckons from the doorway: "May I, / he says to my companion, borrow this / Jewish gentleman for a moment." The Congregation, which we may imagine as vestigial and relict, needs a tenth adult male to make a *minyan* (the quorum for reading the Torah). Borrowed so they can open the Ark at Zichron Moshe, our speaker determines to borrow his uncle (from death, from memory, from family lore?) and to talk with him once more:

May I borrow you for a moment, Nat. We'll celebrate
 By twos, the world's an Ark. We'll talk in slant
 American accent to code the hidden language of the Word.

The trope of borrowing recurs in the poetry collected in *Exigent Futures*, charmingly in "Fifty-three Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth," a poem of house-sitting whose speaker, a sort of seated *flâneur*, squats among borrowed possessions and seeks to exercise a borrowed language.

Reading the essays in *Uncertain Poetries* lends dimensionality—a sense of the variety of his project—to Heller's borrowings. Borrowing for Heller always means Jewishness. This is perhaps by way of Paul Celan, a figure who informs Heller's instructive essay "Diasporic Poetics" and who reminds

Heller that "...the Jew has nothing which is not borrowed, least of all the name Jew." Borrowing also registers Heller's engagement with a series of familiar problems in poetics and literary theory. The poet's language, Heller likes to remember, is "exilic," or "displaced from the object it refers to." The poet's language reveals always a division at its root: language as form and language as sign. In "Diasporic Poetics" Heller writes that "...to be a supplicant before words ... was to gather two intimacies at once, that of the things words named... and that of a renaming; that construct of the poem that collocated all these names of things and yet held them in some new order...." These difficulties of language are explicitly at issue in one of the few new poems in *Exigent Futures*: a bravura comic performance with the tautological title: "We can only wish *valeat quantum valere potest*." They are also the terrain that Heller explores through his variations on borrowing in "Uncle Nat" and elsewhere: the borrowings of the exilic word.

Now in one way it is faint praise to say that equipped with the volume of essays, readers of Heller's verse are propelled (his word) into problems of literary theory, into what in "Fifty-three Rue de Notre Dame de Nazareth" he calls "the century's textual warpings." Poetry that sits so snugly adjacent to theory as this is not the poetry that claims my first attention. Heller's perseverating at these "warpings" is also dismaying in light of his affiliation with the Objectivist tradition. Indeed, some of the richest essays in *Uncertain Poetries* ("Poetry without Credentials," a guide for the ephebe; "The Uncertainty of the Poet," autobiography cum manifesto by way of de Chirico; and the loving memoir "Encountering Oppen") are those where Heller draws upon Objectivist poetics. Certainly some of the sharpest passages in Heller's prose occur where he sets out the positions and practice of Reznikoff, Oppen, Rakosi, and Zukofsky. Heller's mentors revere "the impingement and penetration by the world into our would-be discursiveness, our self-involved chatter." Heller remembers that Oppen calls the poet a "realist" only if he is "someone concerned with a fact outside of himself which he did not entirely create."

The Objectivists, Heller cautions the ephebe, illustrate the distinction between expression and communication. Objectivist communication is "without bias because it has sprung from an actual lived world, unconditioned by any *a prioris*, and is continually undercutting the conventionalized constructs and arrangements of our normal thought patterns."

I do not argue that Heller's poetry is expressive rather than communicative in this sense, or that it is self-involved. One of the distinctions of these poems is their freedom from the intrusions of a highly characterized persona. Another is the high emotional equanimity with which Heller's voices

articulate their worlds. And I can't quite bring myself to claim that facts of the "actual lived world" are absent from Heller's verse. What I do claim is that these facts, when they swim into view, are not fully themselves, not palpably available. The facts in these poems have a detachment or translucency. We might say that Heller's facts are under alibi because they are animated first by an intention toward abstraction and theory.

One feels the abstraction of Heller's facts most sharply in those verses about the poet's Manhattan: "In Central Park," or "Palestine," where a defamiliarizing snowstorm collates Manhattan with "Judaea." Heller's Manhattan is too often merely *donnée* for one or another theoretical excursion. Heller's Hamptons are a stylized and abbreviated place, a kind of Hamptons in the head. A charming exception to this rule of abstraction is the attentiveness of these poems to birds. That Heller is an informed and careful observer of birds is evident throughout *Exigent Futures*, from the early "Paragraphs" to the faux-taxonomic "In Elegiacs, Birds of Florida." Perhaps more than city or memory, birds engage the Objectivist in Heller. A great moment in "Being at East Hampton":

On the island opposite,
Two mute swans we could have dreamed
Beat about each other
Like mad Japanese ghosts.

One final discouraging word about the verse before I move on to remark more fully on the essays of *Uncertain Poetries*. Sometimes, indeed rarely when you remember that these two volumes represent work of two decades, Heller's ear fails him. There is no sense in multiplying examples; I'll just register that in two of the poems I like best Heller offers usages that bring a dubious music to his line: "enclaved" in "For Uncle Nat," and "patina-ed" in "Fifty-three Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth." Grammatically unstable and hard to say, these usages and others like them, mar the sound of poems otherwise pleasing to hear.

The essays range widely through twentieth-century poets and poetics. They rarely fail to persuade and invariably demonstrate the depth of Heller's learning and the fine clarity of his intelligence. It may be that Heller's critical powers are at their most distinguished when they are exercised on the micro level. Addressing a single figure and working close to the text, as he does in essays on Stevens, on David Ignatow as parabolist, and on Lorine Niedecker's "Wintergreen Ridge," among others, Heller is an illuminating guide. Consider, from his Niedecker essay, Heller's fine receptivity to the difficult music of "Wintergreen Ridge":

“Wintergreen Ridge” does not simply withhold closure, but, as well, throughout its length, uses the possibility of closure as one of its devices, almost shutting down or end-stopping itself in places, only to move on, spilling out beyond the tercet backdrop as it enjambes both sound and idea from stanza to stanza.

At only one point in *Uncertain Poetries* do Heller’s critical abilities seem misdirected. This is an essay, originally given as a talk at the Ezra Pound Centennial Conference, entitled “The Narrative of Ezra Gorgon Pound or History Gothicized.” This wrongheaded game of Compare and Contrast collates *The Cantos* with Poe’s *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* in order to include both in an underdetermined category Heller calls American Gothic. The essay is irksome to me. I don’t know whether to be more distressed at the way it diminishes Pound or at how it dignifies Poe’s *Pym*, a work that simply does not repay the attention that Heller, among other credulous souls over the years, has given it.

Everywhere else in *Uncertain Poetries* Heller’s intelligence is luminous and his erudition deep. To illustrate his conviction that in these late chapters of the tradition it is “the first duty of the writer to resist violently the culture’s language games,” Heller offers two early exemplars of such resistance: Lucretius and Blake. However remote from one another with regard to cultural surround and poetic project, each poet, Heller makes one see, replaces his own culture’s discourse with an invented personal idiom. Heller draws adeptly on Basho in “Poetry Without Credentials” to urge the beginner to consider “that poetry could be rooted in acceptance of our state of mind as it is rather than in some abstract subject we think poetry ought to be....” On Rilke, Mallarme, William Bronk, on the credos and watchwords of contemporary M.F.A. mainstream poetry, on the “propellants” of the contemporary avant garde, Heller’s opinions are deeply informed and persuasive.

Often in *Uncertain Poetries* Heller turns his attention to intersections between poetics and Jewishness. Here, sometimes, Heller seems to engage in special pleading for the secular Jew’s qualifications to speak of such things. What results is a kind of agnostic muddle in his language, as where he writes of “a non-theological theology of language” or “a phenomenology of near-secular spirituality.” Such niceties and needle-threadings impair the clarity and force of the essays.

Where such considerations don’t intrude, however, the Jewish essays carry themselves with considerable authority. “The Poetics of Unspeakability,” reflections on language and atrocity occasioned by an anthology of verse by second-generation Holocaust survivors, offers a moment of pointed

frankness when Heller declares himself “irritated by the simple-minded yoking of Auschwitz and contemporary politics or socio-cultural issues such as feminism or the ambivalences of assimilation.” “Diasporic Poetics” sets out, among other things, to clarify just what was Jewish about the Jewish Objectivists. You may believe I came to these remarks with a fair measure of skepticism; I came back from them quite persuaded. Of course Heller claims nothing essential or transhistorical for the Jewishness of Oppen, Zukofsky and company. He finds in them a “diasporic consciousness...one created by the dis-ease and difficulty with which they approached their heritage and by the cultural and poetic apartness under which they worked.” The Objectivists’ Jewishness is manifest for Heller “in their textual practices, in their love of visible objective fact and, most significantly, in their questioning relationship to a Jewish God and Jewish dogma.”

Quite apart from its value as companion to the new and selected poems of *Exigent Futures* (and by the way, I would have preferred more new and no fewer selected) *Uncertain Poetics* is a useful and engaging guide to contemporary poetry and poetics. Together the two volumes confirm that Michael Heller is a very significant person of letters.