SAMPLER

Within the Inscribed

Also by Michael Heller:

Poetry
Two Poems
Accidental Center
Knowledge
Figures of Speaking
In the Builded Place
Marginalia in a Desperate Hand
Wordflow
Exigent Futures: New and Selected Poems
A Look at the Door With the Hinges Off
Eschaton
Beckmann Variations & other poems *
This Constellation Is A Name: Collected Poems 1965–2010
Dianoia
Constellations of Waking
Telescope: Selected Poems

Prose
Earth and Cave
Living Root: A Memoir
Two Novellas: Marble Snows & The Study

Essays
Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry
Speaking the Estranged — Essays on the Work of George Oppen *
Uncertain Poetries: Essays on Poets, Poetry and Poetics *

Editor
Carl Rakosi: Man and Poet
Poets Poems #21

On Michael Heller's Work
The Poetry and Poetics of Michael Heller: A Nomad Memory

* *indicates a title published by Shearsman Books.*

Within the Inscribed

Selected Prose & Conversations

Michael Heller

with a foreword by Xavier Kalck

Shearsman Books

First published in the United Kingdom in 2021 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
PO Box 4239
Swindon
SN3 9FN

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

ISBN 978-1-84861-751-3

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

Many of the writings and interviews in this collection have been previously published and/or presented as indicated below. I would like to thank the publishers, editors and organizations who gave me both permission and space for these works. I also want to thank the many writers and scholars who conversed, counseled, made suggestions, corrected and offered directions in the creation of this collection. Among these, I especially need to thank Xavier Kalck for his Foreword to this book and Norman Finkelstein for letting me publish his side of our conversation in 'On the Poetics of the Jewish Godhead,' part of a long and fruitful dialogue on poetry and poetics we have been engaged in for nearly thirty years. My deepest gratitude also to Burt Kimmelman and Jon Curley whose continuing collaborations and advice have been essential to my writing and thinking.

'On The Way To "The Sacred",' originally presented under the title 'Sacred Encounters: The Poetics of Uncertainty and Disclosure,' was the plenary address at the conference *Tools of the Sacred, Techniques of the Secular: Awakening, Epiphany, Apocalypse, and Doubt in Contemporary English-Language Verse at the* Université Libre de Bruxelles, 4–7 May 2010.

'Buddhadharma and Poetry Without Credentials' published in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, SUNY Press, 2009.

'From the Notes' published in *Beneath A Single Moon: Buddhism in Contemporary American Poetry.* Shambhala Books (2001)

'Remains of the Diaspora' was presented as the annual Duffy Lecture at Notre Dame University, 2007 and published in *Radical Poetics and Secular Jewish Culture*, University of Alabama Press (2010).

'On the Poetics of the Jewish Godhead' Norman Finkelstein and Michael Heller. *Imagining the Jewish God*. Edited by Leonard Kaplan and Ken Koltun-Fromm. Lexington Books, 2016.

'The Cloud: Exodus 35:1–40:38' published in *The Jewish Daily Forward*.

'Letter for *Archae*' published in *Archae* magazine.

'*Now-Time* Poetics: Under the Sign of Benjamin' was presented at the University of Marail, Toulouse conference, 'Tailor-Made Traditions: Contemporary American Experimental Poetry from H. D. to Michael Heller' and published in

Tailor-Made Traditions: Contemporary American Experimental Poetry from H. D. to Michael Heller (2013).

'A Conversation With Fiona McMahon' published in *Tailor-Made Traditions: Contemporary American Experimental Poetry from H. D. to Michael Heller* (2013).

'Oppen's Thematics [what are poets for?]' presented at The Kelly Writers House and published online in *Jacket2*.

'Glad you've initiated this correspondence' published in *The Oppens Remembered.* Edited by Rachel Blau Duplessis. University of New Mexico (2015).

'Dantean Reznikoff' published in *Talisman*.

'Fight for an Illusion: H.D.s *Helen In Egypt*, Pound's *Cantos* and the Masques of Myth and History' was presented at the 'H.D. and Modernity' conference at the Ecole normale supérieure in 2013 and published in *H.D. and Modernity*.

'The *War* of Poetry: Duncan's Heresies' was presented at the 2018 Louisville Conference on Modern Literature and Culture.

'Norman Finkelstein: Notes on the Scribal Poet' published in *Colorado Review*.

'In What Sense…' published in *Parthenia*

'An Interview with Michael Heller' published in the online section of *Rain Taxi*: http://www.raintaxi.com/an-interview-with-michael-heller/.

SAMPLER

for Jane

SAMPLER

Foreword

Xavier Kalck

The essays in this book, *Within the Inscribed: Selected Prose and Conversations*, describe a poet's attempts at a definition of poetry that would do justice to its practice as a quest. They are therefore decidedly tentative, inasmuch as the quest itself is endless. In that, they recall Heller's earlier book of essays entitled *Uncertain Poetries* (2005). Yet if that book explored the ways a poet might transform his and his own literary environment's skepticism toward language into a powerful exploratory poetics, this new endeavor bases that search in the specific notion of the sacred, as being inscribed in language.

These essays tell of a search for the sacred, a term that is at the core of this book. Here is one of Heller's central tenets when it comes to this most misleading and slippery word: "I would define the sacred as that which has been made intelligible and in the process made the world intelligible." Heller is interested in the sacred as a sense of striving for that renewed intelligibility, which does not belong to any single doctrine, which is why he always evokes the idea of the sacred through a complex prism of perspectives, some complementary, some at odds with one another. They must all be brought to bear if one is to fully appreciate this poet's concerns and ongoing journey. Heller typically does not present his reader with a single direction to pursue but offers every time a careful articulation of the tensions that make up each of these perspectives, which are always entwined. The book is divided into two large sections: the first focuses on key theological and philosophical issues relating to the nature of language and of the sacred, and on the possibility of achieving a poetics of mindfulness, while the essays in the second section take the form of dialogues with the works of single poets such as George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff, Allen Grossman, H.D., Ezra Pound, Robert Duncan and Norman Finkelstein. The reader will nevertheless be moved to constantly go back and forth from one essay to another as within a chamber of echoes. To understand why Heller proceeds in this fashion is to understand the deeply dialectic nature of his thinking, which this book demonstrates better than any of his previous collections of essays.

From a theological standpoint, Heller roots his thinking in Judaism, but from an outlook that has been deeply influenced by Buddhist teachings, training and spiritual explorations. Heller never quite speaks of, much less advocates, a turn from one tradition toward the other: what interests him is the displacement of tradition that takes place, the building of "a bridge work between the traditions," a kind of theological wandering, a diaspora of one's own faith. As Heller puts it in 'From the Notes,' "I am not after something syncretic, however; no real interest in the resonatings of terminologies, in the re-mirrorings of systems, all the false paths of *this* being like *that*. Rather, I find myself ripe for rubrics and mottoes, for pressures and instructions on how to proceed … to break through the seductive constellations of human ordering." Hence the fact that the questions Heller battles, difficult though they might be, are not put forth as abstract problems, but experienced through a richly hesitant conversation. As a result, the curious reader will find many biographical lifelines in these pages, from well-known thinkers such as Gershom Scholem or Martin Heidegger, to potentially much less familiar figures like Chögyam Trungpa, Herbert V. Guenther, or Gampopa, which the reader may choose to pull at, eager for the promise of a transformative encounter with such important texts as *The Jewel Ornament of Liberation* or *The Royal Song of Saraha*, as well as key texts from the Judaic and Western philosophic tradition such as Gershom Scholem's *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, Heidegger's writings on language or Benjamin's essays.

Most importantly, Heller's concern with the sacred is with a function of language and as an objective in his poetics. From the "scribal poetics" Heller identifies in Norman Finkelstein's work in connection with William Bronk's legacy, to Heller's many insights into George Oppen's poetry's "generative moments[s] in consciousness," which he proceeds to contrast with Duncan's proliferating heresies of meaning. Still, this one central guideline does not help bring peace to Heller's anxious spiritual considerations. Rather, it drives Heller to display a profound skepticism as he contemplates the synonymities between several belief systems and spiritual horizons since, as he writes of Oppen, he is engaged in a "search for a poetics free of dogma and *a priori* views of poetry." This is not as contradictory as might be imagined. In fact, I would argue it describes very adequately Heller's dialectics of concealment and revelation, to borrow the words Heller himself quotes from poet Haim Nahman Bialik, and which can be summarized in the idea that, "the fullness of language must remind

us of the void it conceals." Such complementary thinking leads Heller's dual search both for that fullness of expression and for the means to draw as near to that void as possible. By keeping this sort of balance, Heller navigates between a freedom of thought verging on the chaotic and a thoughtfully organized disorder, knowing that this very chaos is rich with many beacons of light, even though he will not be satisfied with a single one.

A similar case can be made regarding Heller's philosophical outlook. His chief focus is on phenomenology—German and French—with a slant on aesthetics. However, if Heller discusses notions of presence and the concept of Being, from a European perspective rather than an Emerson or Thoreau-based American standpoint, he is not concerned with Merleau-Ponty's essay on Cézanne per se, or with Walter Benjamin's essays as such. The phenomenal world, along with humanity's aesthetic accomplishments or philosophical doctrines are envisaged here as so many stepping-stones and, I would venture, subsumed under a single heading—that of language, though I should be careful to point out that Heller is certainly not suggesting any hierarchical superiority of poetry over any other human endeavor. Accordingly, what is particularly refreshing in these essays is that the accumulation of reference points does not compose a web of allusions but punctuates the book with moments in a continued dialogue.

The reason for this is that "language" does not evoke for Heller the poet's command over it; on the contrary, his preoccupation with language sends the poet back to his struggle, "to produce an articulation of that which was previously inarticulate," bearing in mind that that which is inarticulate will never be thoroughly expressed. Heller's poetic faith lies in "linguistic attempts" to enact larger issues which may be approached, not settled, in language. The poet's hope is for "momentary" revelations; a point which, in circular fashion, leads one back to theological matters and to a notion of the sacred as what may be revealed by language and named but only aimed at—not captured in any static representational sense. One will have recognized, in Heller's emphasis on the limits of naming, and as he himself explains, traces of Scholem's thinking on the Kabbalah, of Benjamin's writings on language, and also of Lionel Kochan's profoundly stimulating study of Judaism and iconoclasm, *Beyond the Graven Image: A Jewish View* (1997). Heller also locates his thinking firmly within the American Whitmanian tradition of crisscrossed de-sanctification and re-sanctification of the world, where Buddhism, Western philosophy and the sense of a secular holiness within

U.S. poetry merge into a new sense of awe. His is a similar quest for the spiritual within the secular world, by way of an apophatic theology, a *via negativa* defined as a way through a pared-down language toward the physicality of the world accessed through words provided they are treated, to quote George Oppen, "as enemies." The paradox of a palpable word is defined by Heller thus: "Somewhere in every act of perception, one is reduced to a word. This is not a word that stands for oneself; nor does it represent oneself. This word (the poem) *is* oneself." Heller's goal may seem unattainable, until one is reminded of the path followed by objectivist poets all along the twentieth century, which Heller has been so instrumental in championing. Many of the most resonant essays in this book are indeed those devoted to George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, in which Heller's idea of a "poetry without credentials" becomes most fascinatingly enacted.

Uncertainty and the patient disowning of credentials have been paramount in Heller's writing for some time, but what is so striking in this book is the perfect equilibrium he reaches there between the credentials one must unlearn and the search for a workable poetic creed. Again, the contradictory character of this logic is what drives it forward. In a sense, it may be compared with the key use of language in a poetics of disclosure that is aimed at showing what lies precisely beyond language's abilities to show. The paradoxical nature of this thinking could be problematic if it were circular to the point of frustration, but it is not. It relies on a passion for continued explorations which Heller calls "midrashic," when he writes that "[t]he midrashic condition for the poet amounts to a situation in which no issue of language is finally settled. Caught at every point in language's endlessness, […] he finds his environment cocoon-like, ever-circling into self-referentiality." Such a cocoon could easily be construed as exceedingly restrictive, although the idea of a self-interpreting text is a foundational element in Midrash. Why it is never the case here is the reason the book makes for such a compelling read: Heller's writing may at times be quite personal and even intimate, he never ceases to share this endlessness of language so that it becomes conversational and eventually relational.

Take for instance the remarks assembled under the heading, 'On the Poetics of the Jewish Godhead,' initially collected as part of a dialogue between Heller and fellow poet Norman Finkelstein, published in a collection of essays entitled *Imagining the Jewish God* (2016). I am thinking, in particular, of the moment when Heller refers to his recent poem, the first in his 2016 collection *Dianoia*, entitled 'Mappah,' the

Hebrew word for the cloth that binds together and protects the scrolls of the Torah. The *mappah* is meant to shield the text from the light of the world, but Heller expands that light to include the dark light of the flames that would destroy it. Used as a title and therefore as an image of the text itself, the word *mappah* suggests that the poem wraps itself around the sacred—its protective embroidery a tactile threshold for our access to a revelation which must be kept out of sight, thus testifying to the dialectics of the sacred as that which can only be shown when it is hidden. *Mappah* is also another word for a wimple, the piece of cloth used during ritual circumcision, among German Jews particularly, to swaddle the child (it is literally cocoon-like), which would be decorated with the child's name and date of birth along with wishes for future prosperity. If one takes this other meaning into consideration, the poem may then be said to open up an elaborate dialogue between tradition and individual life, the sacred text and the mortal body, in which the protective (and coercive) parchment-like linen cloth binds together very different levels of reality and of language use.

"Someone lifts and folds the cloth, someone follows the Hebrew with / the *yod*, the sculpted finger cast in gold. *Davar* and *davar*," writes Heller in this poem. Despite the use of specific terms—the *yod*, a pointer used to read the Torah (which resembles a hand, *yad* in Hebrew) and to keep from touching the sacred text with one's hand, or the word *davar* (speech, words or utterance in Hebrew, but also in the plural God's commandments)—the sense of a loss of ritual and of belonging seems to be suggested in the vague mention of an unidentified "someone" who is performing these gestures and tasks, a choice which contributes to the reader's impression that words and writing are located by Heller in a kind of in-between or half-way between the sacred and the secular, and between the communal and the singular. One might even say that Heller's poetics of uncertainty advocates against the use of such a tool as a *yod*, in that the poet should point directly to the phenomenal word as well as to the written testaments of what that world is or was and must not act as if his were the hand of a god. The word "someone" in Heller's poem, in that sense, means anyone, be they sanctified and authorized or not. However, Heller's poetics shares in the special condition of the *yod* on another level, as the smallest of signs with which God's name nonetheless begins. This particular position of the *yod* is well known. It is the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet, yet it is the initial letter of the tetragram. Much has been written about it, namely from the perspective

of these oddly paradoxical features, but also because it has been used as an alphabetical allegory of the Jewish people due to its proximity with the Yiddish word *yid* (a Jew, without any of the offensive connotations of that term in English). As an allegory, critics have noted, the *yod* also exemplifies the duality of Yiddish as a secular tongue made up of several vernacular languages and yet written in the Hebrew alphabet which, when modern Hebrew was but a dream, stood out as a sacred tongue.

Heller's poetry, like much of his thinking such as it is recorded in these pages, enacts the function of that *yod*—it takes the reader by the hand over that gap between the sacred and the real and into the inscribed. Charles Reznikoff once wrote of the Hanukkah lights that they were lit "not to see by but to look at." Heller's relationship to language echoes this kind of displacement inasmuch as, illuminated by the sacred, language becomes for him something not only to speak with but to look at. This book stands as Heller's invitation to enter with him in that dialogue about language which dives into the most distant and ancient past while it remains most urgent.

Xavier Kalck is an associate professor at Sorbonne University (Paris). He is the author of several books on twentieth-century poetry in English and French, among them, *George Oppen's Poetics of the Commonplace*, 2017; *Pluralism, Poetry, and Literacy: A Test of Reading and Interpretive Techniques*, 2021, *"We said Objectivist": Lire les poètes Lorine Niedecker, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, Louis Zukofsky*, 2019; *La poésie américaine entre chant et parole: l'héritage objectiviste*, 2020), as well as many articles on poetics.

"the sacred has so inscribed itself in language that while it must be interpreted, it cannot be removed

—Geoffrey Hartman

SAMPLER

Author's Note

That the *logos* is divine, that it embodies the aura of the sacred, an aura that infuses *poesis*—this is ancient lore and contemporary practice. These are the thematics that I develop in the first section of this collection of writings, conversations, notes and reviews. *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* directs those searching for the meaning of *logos* to look in the entries for "ethos" and "pathos." Ethos centers in the speaker and pathos concerns the listening or reading audience's response. Rhetoric, in its largest sense as the movement of language, becomes bridgework. *Poesis* is shaped by *logos*, by making. But also, especially in the present, as older traditions lose their hold, there is a reverse movement, in which *poesis* remakes *logos*. These are the terms across which we speak and with which I approach the question of divinity and the sacred in the activity of making poems. I think of poetry here as a particular kind of awareness of the world, of its languages, its specificities and tonalities, as enlargements of our sense of what is divine, what is sacred. Further, I seek a ground which through the act of poetry invests these terms with a secular dimension, independent of received religions, which is why, in a number of essays, I draw on the non-theistic aspects of Western philosophy and Buddhist thought.

Such explorations can be seen as already implicit in my previous writings, not only in the work on the Objectivist poets and George Oppen in *Conviction's Net of Branches* and in *Speaking The Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen* but also underlying the writings in *Uncertain Poetries* that focused on poets as diverse as Robert Duncan, Lorine Niedecker, Armand Schwerner, Montale, Stevens and on the instabilities of poetic language, especially in the light of modernism, post-modernism, the Jewish Diaspora and the Shoah. My aim as a practicing poet has been to explore these deeply unsettled relationships to culture, religion and spirituality. This gathering of essays and conversations, spanning approximately twenty years and culled out of a larger body of writings, can be regarded as an extension and development of those long-standing concerns.

How did this present gathering of writings come about? A sort of ur-event that led me to organize this book came when, in going through my papers, I found the text of 'On the Way to "The Sacred"' (originally

entitled 'Sacred Encounters: The Poetics of Uncertainty and Disclosure,'), a plenary address I had given nearly ten years ago in Brussels after having received and accepted an invitation from Professor Franca Belarsi of the Université Libre de Bruxelles for the 2010 conference, *Tools of the Sacred, Techniques of the Secular: Awakening, Epiphany, Apocalypse and Doubt in Contemporary English-Language Verse*. That somewhat long-winded title resonated with the title of Jerome Rothenberg's ground-breaking anthology, *Technicians of the Sacred*, and Professor Bellarsi readily confessed that Rothenberg's work had been an inspiration to forming the conference. In the spirit of that anthology, what intrigued me most and led me to want to participate was the phrase "tools of the sacred." What were these tools was the question on my mind when I accepted the invitation to speak. One implicit answer, a governing one for me, is given in Geoffrey Hartman's phrase which I have taken as the epigraph for this book: *"the sacred has so inscribed itself in language that while it must be interpreted, it cannot be removed."* This sense of inscription and trace is what I explore here.

This collection is organized into three related sections. The first section, as I have suggested above, ranges over topics such as Gershom Scholem's notion of "secular holiness," Heidegger's connection to Eastern thought and its influence on such poets as Wallace Stevens and George Oppen, the relation of diasporic Judaism to poetics, Buddhist practice and poetry, Walter Benjamin's "now-time" poetics, and the "sacred" as inscribed in language as discussed in my conversation with Norman Finkelstein in 'On the Poetics of the Jewish Godhead.' The second section contains essays and reviews on specific poets, the themes and questions their work provokes. I write about Oppen and Reznikoff making poetry out of, as Oppen called it, "a language ruined," about H.D. and Robert Duncan, and their poetics or way of handling language, history and questions of culture and myth. I also briefly contemplate Finkelstein's "scribal" poetics, a theme of his early book *Scribe*, which strikes me as resonating with many of the themes of this collection. My reflections focus primarily on poetic language among these poets who throughout their work have been concerned with religious and spiritual traditions and on the questions of uncertainty and poetic-truth value that surround these traditions. The third section, or 'Coda,' consists of three works: a short autobiographical sketch on science and "theisms," a response to a question on poetry and our current cultural and political situation, and a recent interview that covers many interwoven phases of my writing and thinking about poetry.

While this collection of work composed over a number of years is not a monograph, it does exhibit some monograph-like, perhaps obsessive qualities. Among the writers referred to again and again are Benjamin, Scholem, Heidegger and Oppen along with numerous references to Merleau-Ponty, Bialik, Stevens, Cavell, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Herbert V. Guenther. Their work and thought thread through and, in a way, knit together much of the writing and discussion here. I consider whatever I have to offer in relation to their work to be only hesitantly put forward, more homage, more footnote than scholarship.

"Remains"
(An Addendum)

I write this as I send off the manuscript of this collection to its publisher. It is December, 2020, and words other than mine come to mind: "The disaster takes care of everything," writes Maurice Blanchot in *The Writing of Disaster*. Later he exclaims: "ruin of words, demise writing, faintness, faintly murmuring, what remains without remains." I too, faintly murmuring, write down some few words: the pandemic, the Covid 19 virus and the insanity and absurdity in politics that, like the disease, has infected so many. As with the attacks of September 11th, there is now suddenly a sort of hinge in human affairs, the pandemic and the madness of those in political power, on which literature and the arts swing. They form an axis or take-off point from which words have to stray, to intermingle. At first, they make for an occasion in which certain options of expression seemed to be foreclosed, and yet these foreclosures are in no way sets of rules or prohibitions, they only speak to how one now views one's time. They are not felt to be the sort of obiter dictum that Adorno pronounced on poetry after the Holocaust. Perhaps the following anecdote from Giacometti will seem trivial, but he once spoke, actually quite eloquently, if there were a conflagration in his studio, of saving his cat first before his paintings or sculpture. His words—let's take them as sincerely meant—expressed his intention of wanting to set art in balance with the rest of reality, and he was aware not only of the limited responses art could make to a critical situation, but also of the choices one might face in a crisis. He saw the hinge on his studio door quite literally.

The hinge is no mere moment in time, registering a sea-change. If that were so, Adorno would have been right to chastise art and expression.

But it is a fact that poets refused then as now suddenly to be silent. In fact, on disaster, we have become almost voluble. The hinge, then, appears as primarily a focal point upon which all of one's history, personal, political and cultural, is concentrated by powerful external events. No event for the living, for those possessed of memory and consciousness, is a lobotomy. What "remains without remains" is recollection, something the disaster cannot erase unless in the heat of anguish or passion, we permit our own forgetfulness. And such reflections on our past have a kind of spotlessness to them, which is why the phrase "without remains" doesn't strike me as being either nihilistic or defeatist. This spotlessness, however, is something that doesn't automatically exist. In fact, it must be worked toward. If memory is obscured by the passion of present event, if it is colored into distortion, then, indeed, it is not spotless. If, on the other hand, we can remember our past clearly, that we had such and such a liking and such and such a hate, that we loved X and Y and Z and feared A and B, that we got immense pleasure or anger and frustration out of the dailiness of our lives, whether creating or whether experiencing the world, then we are beginning to see spotlessly, without obscurations.

"Thousands of words, myriad interpretations, are only to free you from obstructions," writes Siketo Kisen in *Song of the Grass Roof Hermitage* (700–790 AD). As I write, I'm circling around trying to say something, trying to justify sending this manuscript to my publisher (all of which was written before our current disasters), at a moment when the world cries out in pain and bewilderment, much of which has been self-inflicted. So I try to make a gesture against the suffering, not so much to relieve it—I don't think art can sufficiently console—but to suggest that, no more and no less, any act which attempts to bring understanding and definition is an attempt to see spotlessly, one of those "myriad interpretations" which leads one to clarity. And then there is the question and possibility of the sacred, for us, for us to use, to make, which is at the root of this work.