

LIVING ROOT



MICHAEL HELLER

A M E M O I R

LIVING ROOT

SUNY *series in*
Modern Jewish Literature and Culture

Sarah Blacher Cohen, editor

LIVING ROOT

A Memoir

MICHAEL HELLER

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

Published by
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS, ALBANY

© 2000 State University of New York

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission. No part of this book may be stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means including electronic, electrostatic, magnetic tape, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior permission in writing of the publisher.

For information, address
State University of New York Press,
State University Plaza, Albany, NY 12246

Production and book design, Laurie Searl
Marketing, Fran Keneston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Heller, Michael, 1937–

Living root : a memoir / by Michael Heller.

p. cm. — (SUNY series in modern Jewish literature and culture)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-7914-4633-6 (alk. paper) — ISBN 0-7914-4634-4 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Heller, Michael, 1937– 2. Heller, Michael, 1937—Childhood and youth. 3. Poets, American—20th century—Biography. 4. Jews—United States—Biography. I. Title. II. Series

PS3558.E4762 Z47 2000

811'.54—dc21

[B]

99-089096

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Tena,
who was there at the end of this story,
and for Bummy and Nick*

This page intentionally left blank.

Acknowledgments

I owe a debt of gratitude to a number of people who provided suggestions, counsel and feedback during the writing of this work, Jane Augustine, Larry Fixel, Anthony Rudolf and the late Armand Schwerner. My thanks to Tod Thilleman of Spuyten Duyvil Press for his help on the illustrations for this book. My thanks also to the SUNY Press production staff for their help and guidance in transforming the work into a book.

Portions of this work, some of it in different form, have appeared in the following magazines:

“From Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *American Poetry Review*, Summer 2000.

“The American Jewish Clock” by Michael Heller, published in *Confrontation*, No. 50, Fall 1992.

“Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *The Five Finger Review*, No. 15, 1996.

“Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *The Jewish Quarterly*, Spring 1999.

“Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 1991.

“Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *Talisman*, No. 11, Fall 1993.

“Living Root” by Michael Heller, published in *TO: A Journal of Poetry, Prose and the Visual Arts*, Vol. 2, Nos. 3 and 4, Spring 1994.

A number of the poems in this work have been previously published as follows: “Bialystok Stanzas” first appeared in *Knowledge* by Michael Heller (SUN 1980). “In A Dark Time, On His Grandfather,” “Constellations of Waking,” “Some Anthropology,” “The American Jewish Clock,”

“Mamaloshon” and “Accidental Meeting With An Israeli Poet” were published in *In The Builded Place* by Michael Heller (Coffee House Press, 1989).

I am grateful to the editors and publishers of the above publications for first presenting the work and for their kind permission to reprint it.

I would also like to thank the New York Foundation for the Arts for a Fellowship to complete the writing of this work.

Thus the Jew bends over his book, knowing in advance
that the book always remains to be discovered in its
words and in its silences.

—Edmond Jabès

A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing
between major and minor ones acts in accordance with
the following truth: nothing that has ever happened
should be regarded as lost for history. . . . Each moment
[mankind] has lived becomes a *citation à l'ordre du jour*—
and that day is Judgment Day.

—Walter Benjamin

Semite: to find a way for myself

—George Oppen

This page intentionally left blank.

THE RITUALS: possibly the whole of one's Jewishness, except for God, could be squeezed, as from a vast sponge made of all time and space, into a few concentrated drops of liquid as ritual. Would these drops be honey or acid? For the memorialist in one's nature, they are, naturally, honey or amber, resinous substances that encase and preserve events until they have the dull finish of a minor detail in a painting by an Old Master. Yet for one like myself, who never fully came into belief, who has always felt in matters of religion both exposed and transgressive, the rituals are acid, each drop, as from a cosmic sponge, etching away the small certainties of personal history, corroding portions of the unsheltered self, that self which does not acknowledge God but which God might see, to burn like an open wound in air.

Such equivocal and painful feelings must have come early to me, probably as a result of an awareness of my mother's skepticism concerning matters of religion. For often, the ritual forms and objects of my childhood, familiar as they were, comprised so many hand- and footholds for traversing the self's etched-out landscape, a *terra incognita* of hope and fear, of risk and parental admonition. As a child in the early nineteen forties, six or seven years old in Miami Beach, even as I sat, sunk deep in the velvet plush seats of Temple Emanuel on Washington Avenue, feeling the rapture of the ritual occasions, I sensed I was climbing a cliff face, the very physiognomy of otherness, the pathways of memory by which I skirted the

fragile edging of the present. For me, then, the calendar of the Holy Days has always been a matter of nostalgia mixed with a deep, electric panic.

The rituals must occur in time and space—the duration of the Passover supper, for instance, with its stately movement of symbolic substances and courses, the bitter herbs, the matzos, the placing, with one's finger, of the red dots of wine onto the gleaming porcelain of the dinner plate. The child was thrilled: wine, plagues, blood, a transubstantial progression. In the America of the Forties, in my childhood, surrounded by the terrible hearsay of the Holocaust, the tale of Moses' deliverance, the marching out of Egypt (I saw it in my mind much as a Cecil B. DeMille would frame it: a winding, dusty band of Jews in loose flowing robes stretching from horizon to horizon), was a heroics, a portion of collective memory infused with hope.

As I recall, at this same time, as the century touched a near-bottomless void of evil and unspeakable cruelty, I was obsessed with the story of Gideon depicted in one of those Classic Comics of the Bible. The frames of the comic strip presented the story as a series of stirring visual drumbeats: Gideon builds, with his father's goods, with his father's bullocks and stands of trees, the altar to God, stealthily, at night. Gideon throws down his father's altar to Ba'al. And it is Gideon who, with the righteousness of youth, rebukes the Lord's angel: "O my Lord, if the Lord be with us, why then is all this befallen us?" Gideon's faith wavers; he demands of the Lord a sign. And again, an angel comes and with a touch of his staff, sets fire to the offering that Gideon has made. Now Gideon hears the voice of the Lord telling him that he, Gideon, shall be the instrument by which the Israelites will be set free. In the clear unambiguous cartoons of the comic book, in the edited speech forms of the dialogue balloons, there was a paradigm of revolutionary fantasy, one which all young people might entertain: to receive a divine call and to take from the corrupted elders and build a new, righteous, less oppressive world. The biblical cadence of Gideon's words as rendered in the King James Bible, which the comic book reproduced, his upbraiding of authority with its repeats of "Lord" and "us," astonished and disturbed me. It hinted at anguish but also justification. It even suggested some new pattern of relationship to my parents, who were, of course, Authority, thus implying to me the possibility of reason or of going beyond the blind willful reactions of childhood.

This story played in my mind against what I could intuit from my overhearings concerning the events in Europe. It entered into me physically, as

though recoding the networks of my nerves. I was fascinated by the simple drawings in the comic book of the swords of Gideon and his band. The hilts of these swords, in the comic book artist's renderings, resembled those of well-made, functional butcher knives. Their simplicity was a strange lure to me, and over and over, sometimes consciously, though often unconsciously, I would doodle pencil drawings of the hilts in my notebook or on school paper. There were little ripples for finger grips on one side of these hilts, and as I drew, I could feel my hands closing around them. The sensation was so strong and vivid that I felt an immense empowering every time I was conscious of making such a drawing. The closest I had ever come to such a similar rush of energy occurred when I ran in the school playground, leaping up, half believing I would take off and fly like Superman.

While I was often curious about events in the Bible and asked questions of my Sunday School teachers, I felt absolute clarity on the story of Gideon and played his war games by myself in the nearby yards and parks. Under no circumstances was I going to discuss Gideon with adults, not with stern Rabbi Lehrman or ever-smiling Cantor Berkowitz whose Russian face was all knobby pink-blushed apples—those benevolent dictators of the Temple who, in their roles as our spiritual attendants, bred both affection and ambivalence. For the Law and the Book were in endless strife with the greensward of Flamingo Park and the horseplay of comrades. Gideon was my tale against the officious nature of spiritual duties; it was a tale against the Tale, which I could harbor as my secret and my plan. So it was that an older time could tell against the present if invoked as ritualized story.

Yet even as a child I associated narration with closure, with the last words of the small book a parent held, with its bright pictures and indulgent rhymes, the end of speaking and speaker, synonymous with the end of the child's day which was like death to me, when my mother left off reading me stories as I fell asleep. Here was such confused maelstrom of emotion: to come with heart beating to the story's end and yet to know it as *the* end. When I was very young, this hearing of my mother's voice seemed to produce a little orgasm, a flurry of deep hopes and sadnesses, which this stroking of the tympanum with sound and word had led to. The whole world crammed with a child's fantasies and distortions had been led in through the gate of the ear, that most feminine of organs. And even when I strained against fatigue, it seemed that my hearing was trying to reach out and clasp around this maker of sounds, this speaker who was my mother.



ZALMAN HELLER, my grandfather, Brooklyn, 1944. A rabbi in both Bialystok and New York City, he was given to declaiming the Jewish rituals in, to use Osip Mandelstam's phrase, "railroad prose."

The ritual story, the utterance from the Book of Books, transmitted from before the past had even begun, *in illo tempore*, as the anthropologists put it, was another matter. Such a story, timeless and eternal, had to be divine. Mantled in the sacred, it was meant to be heard and reheard, and, above all, to be pondered. Revelation was, by definition, didactic. As with *my* Gideon, it was meant to be rehearsed in private, in the crypts and fissures of personality where it had uses undreamt of by others. I was a well-behaved child as children go, at least that is how my parents so observed me; but secreted away in me where no one could look was all the black fury of generational difference, a blind will to grow which came together with parent, history, the wars and nights of terror in Europe. Story was its catalyst.



I return to the ritual supper, a sensorium of people and objects made blurry by sweetish wine. I remember now before me as in a dream the ceremonial lace of the table cloth, the crude, childish illustrations of the *Haggadah*, heavy brass of candlesticks, the brown and white stipples of the matzo. Tastes and sights. And yet these, strong as they are in memory, are not as powerful as the sounds I heard. More than anything else, I remember intonings: my grandfather's dronelike mumbling through prayers and instructions; later, my father's more clearly enunciated sounds.

For my grandfather, a rabbi and teacher, the whole ceremony, all ceremonies, were woven into one continuous chant, a swift, impelled, if muffled, music. A kind of absolute ease that alternately filled me with awe and fright. Safely sheltered by faith, his words could be uttered without impediment, without resistance to their very physicality, the puffs of accented breath, the glottals and dentals of their makeup. Even more, their semantic auras held no sway, it seemed, in my grandfather's consciousness as he recited them. This was very clear in the way he droned the passages, omitting all emphasis of meaning. To use the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam's phrase, my grandfather declaimed in "railroad prose," in the art of the sentence coupler. I had the impression that my grandfather felt his responsibility to these passages was *pro forma*, an unquestioning recital of God's command and that portion of God's mind which applied to the ritual supper.

My father's beliefs were less hard and fixed than his father's; he took more seriously each word, tried to feel its exactness, like a solid object held in his mouth, going in fear of the god he was far less comfortable with

than was my grandfather. I, who am godless, took much from my father, including this legacy: to seek for the precise word, the secular word, which would deliver.

As a young boy, I had the childhood ambition to be good, to be godly, which meant I identified godliness with the speaking of the male line, the father and grandfather. But I also had a slight speech defect, a kind of *logos interruptus*, which shamed me, not only before the God I imagined then, but also before my mother, a teacher of speech, and so made me unworthy in my own eyes. In my tenth year, my mother, with perfect tact and gentleness, made light of this minor complication in my speech habits, sending me in a casual fashion to see the school speech teacher who effected some correction in my pronunciation. Yet like all children I lived with invented omens and invented codes, fears that transmuted to divine or parental law, and which in my mind separated me out from the rest. To this day I mangle certain words, transpose consonantals, suffer a kind of oral dyslexia, all of which mark me as of the tribe of the fallen. For years I felt reduced to silence whenever I came to a passage marked “In Unison” in the synagogue prayerbooks.



Stories and poems, not as entities, little narrative eggs, but as layers of sound on paper. In time, the reader goes from one closed loop of narration to another, hearing consonances and dissonances, resolving these or living in their irresolution. There are painful works yet to be written, not about how voices air their tales, but about how the books sit, adjacent to each other, about their cancellations and silences in the mind of a solitary reader.

Always, as I ruminated on my family and its past, I was listening to sounds, to rituals and voices, but I was hearing as well the faint music of closures, of one page laid over another, of a story that had to die so that later another might be voiced. What deadly quiet.

Walter Benjamin, that near-tragic wanderer in the German-Jewish diaspora who in a sense is the patron saint of this writing, wanted to “rub history against the grain.” My own task here is rather similar, to rub story against story, to rub a life against the story’s flow, to force time to jump the track of its well-grooved channel. Out of the dissonances in the stories comes the ambiguous conflict of allegiances, the deadened roots of decidedly imperfect Jewish and personal history, that text-game of time and

religion, which beckons again and so wars with a cleansing present, that sleep of old reasons and memories obscured in the letterless sensate of now. How to reawaken?

In my mid-twenties, and with a sudden consciousness of beginnings, as though a new strange plant had begun to grow in my chest, in the throes of a psychic homelessness, that perpetual psychology of youth *cum* exile, I had attempted, when I first decided to be a writer, to build a house from the ashes of others, to find personhood, not in religion (my mother's atheistic leanings had forever sheared me off from belief) but in some lost ethnicity, ethnicity being to writers what patriotism is to the scoundrel.

In this endeavor, I am remembering that I was aided by my father, a fact which now strikes so curiously, since of all the members of the Heller family, it was he who in his youth had made the sharpest break with home, with religion and with his rabbi-father's heavy-handed authority. My father had invoked his own private diaspora, running away to sea at the age of fifteen, a Jewish Ishmael leaving my grandfather, a stern Ahab of a parent, on the shores of New York City.



I'm recalling now that it was in the early nineteen sixties on one of my periodic visits to Florida where my parents had moved that I first mentioned my literary intentions to my by then ailing father, run down and debilitated by the early stages of Parkinson's disease. True, I had been living and working in New York for some time, and I was twenty-six years old. But I still felt, almost as a tic or habit, a son's deference toward his father. My father had been no patriarch in the usual sense of that word. He had neither dominated at the dinner table nor sought to impose his will. His few temper tantrums, while memorable, mostly betrayed the frustration and desperation he'd bottled up over my mother's bad heart and his own downsliding fortunes. In my youth, when the family was moving piecemeal to Florida because of my mother's illness, there had been long periods of time when he was not present, having to remain in New York settling his business affairs.

So this faint desire to genuflect toward my father's presence had about it the quality of worshipping at an abandoned shrine, of *dovening* as if by rote over a dead book or false idol. That inherent falsity meant only that in wanting his blessing or judgment (either would have been extremely

important to me then), I had agreed to conspire in mutual bad faith with the fictional roles of child and parent we had rarely inhabited. More than conspire, for the deep unending loneliness I felt as a child welled up whenever those roles threatened to dissolve, and I glimpsed through veils and curtains the blank emptiness of adulthood with its formless and open—and terrifying—spaces.

On the particular day in the mid-nineteen sixties that I am thinking about, bright and rounded with the Floridian spring sun, I had come armed from the North with a personal resolve bolstered by my winning a small but distinguished prize in poetry, and by the certain knowledge that I was quitting my job to go live in Europe for a year. It was just after mid-day, and my father was, as usual, half-asleep in the gloomy living room of our old apartment on Euclid Avenue in the south part of Miami Beach. The shades were pulled against the light, a comfort for him against the brightness, against the pain, it seemed to me, of living in a world circumscribed by his illness. I found him sunk in his beaten yellow easy chair, a tattered and frayed object which had become his personal redoubt. He was wearing one of his rumpled dark suits and a tie, and under the jacket an old stained cardigan buckled like a washboard at the buttons.

Such a scene, that chair especially, are emblemized in my memory. On another one of my visits, I was to paint him seated there, his hands resting on his thighs, his cocked head aslant the curved back that encircled him. A pencil moustache and a trim Van Dyke beard gave him an air of inscrutability. This watercolor hangs now in my study, my father's sleep-lidded eyes gazing down from the grainy paper over my desk where I write. Later, in the mid-seventies, in a moment of parental pride gone vaguely surreal, my mother traced out the design pattern that I had created for the cover of my first book of poems. From the design, she then cut pieces of avocado green terrycloth into a slipcover for my father's easy chair. Like a pop art or avant-garde monstrosity, my book jacket design was destined to balloon and bulge under my father's recumbent form. In the last months of his life, my father napped blissfully unawares like the statue of a crusader on a moss-covered tomb.

But to go back. On the day that I am thinking of, in the late spring of 1964, the time when I first presented myself as a writer to my father, he had, in his life, already embraced a placid illness-borne inertia, a complete and benign frame of reference that overlay or nudged to the periphery any waves of discomfort or irritation.