

# The integral actuality of human experience



*Ian Brinton*

*Walking, a love story*, Toby Olson (Occidental Square Books, 2020)  
*Death Sentences*, Toby Olson (Shearsman Books, 2019)

*Telescope*, selected poems, Michael Heller (New York Review Books, 2019)

Toby Olson's novel is of course about movement. The movement involved in the physical process of walking reflects the movement forward from a burial in the past to an awakened awareness of the present. The overriding importance of this movement is emphasised in the epigraph to *Walking*, a quotation from Xenophon:

Excess of grief for the dead is madness; for it is an injury to the living, and the dead know it not.

That reflection is presented with uncompromising clarity in one of the early poems in Olson's collection *Death Sentences* many of which are addressed to his wife, Miriam, who died in 2014:

About life and death, about dreaming,  
 about the picture of you with your new bicycle,  
 about memory:

the dead's messages  
 written into the skins of the living.

(‘Standard-18, *There Will Never Be Another You*’)

The act of walking might seem sometimes to be the pacing of a prison cell or the claustrophobic circularity of Van Gogh's 1890 painting of ‘Prisoners Exercising’. As Olson's narrator Aphrodite sets out to escape the eyes of her father she is in almost constant motion even walking up and down the aisles of the occasional bus she travels on ‘getting nowhere, while the bus took me somewhere’. Trapped between the room of her dying mother and the eerily penetrating gaze of her father, Aphrodite ‘would walk out of the oppression of that space into the relative freedom of another’. The close confinement of her father's gaze imprisons her wherever she may try to escape to and ‘he would follow me, sit me down again, then penetrate me with those eyes of his, and I would once again have to rise and walk away into other rooms and free spaces. Again and again.’ However, as with the prisoners in the exercise yard she remains confined in spite of the movement:

Time for a little counting. Each step, up to five-hundred,  
 then back again to zero. Something to do. Like humming. I  
 am not bored, nor anxious, nor do I have hopes of getting  
 somewhere. I am just moving.

On the first page of this remarkably terrifying and uplifting novel we are told that the narrator ‘walked here from Wisconsin’ and I found myself unable not to recall the opening of William Faulkner's *Light in August* which began with Lena's optimistic search for the father of her soon-to-be-born child:

Sitting beside the road, watching the wagon mount the hill  
 toward her, Lena thinks, ‘I have come from Alabama: a fur  
 piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking. A fur piece.

However, the movement in Olson's novel might also be

worth a comparison with the early statement from Paul Auster's dystopian vision *In the Country of Last Things* where the narrator warned us that when we walk through the streets we must take care to remember to take only one step at a time, to avoid falling:

Your eyes must be constantly open, looking up, looking down, looking ahead, looking behind, on the watch for other bodies, on your guard against the unforeseeable.

In Toby Olson's novel *Aphrodite* as narrator seems initially to be in charge of the story which she tells but, as she is increasingly compelled to recognise, 'these people that I have created are beginning to move on, to move away from my control'. Her awareness foreshadows the novelist's own words in the closing pages of the book as he tells the reader:

She speaks directly to us, and as she moves along, she creates characters before our eyes. But then something happens, and these characters step away from her, move beyond her control, take on a life of their own.

In those closing pages Olson also pays tribute to Gilbert Sorrentino's 1979 novel *Mulligan Stew* and it might be worth recalling that in an interview with Donald Phelps published in *Vort 6* some five years before that novel's appearance Sorrentino had compared writing prose to 'shovelling coal':

You have a plan, of course, and each day the plan becomes more complicated. You have to concentrate on what you're up to and then you have to remember that there are things that you have written earlier that you want to revise...

These revisions permit a novel to generate its own movement forward and there is an increasing awareness of what might have been different in that past which has led to this present. It is as though we tread upon the bones of the long dead and 'those who are gone / are still truculent after passage / into cocoons in memory's storage' ('Death Sentences, 6').

This close connection between the past and the present

is central to Michael Heller's comment upon his own 'urge to write' as he described it in his memoir *Living Root* (SUNY Press, 2000) as the 'setting down of a word in the blankness of space, as the dropping of an anchor in the abyss'. A few years earlier in his 1994 essay 'Encountering Oppen', Michael Heller had brought his eye to focus on what it is that makes us who we are. He suggested that every individual and occasion in one's life becomes 'an actual influence, a scene of instruction, a mentoring of sorts'. Thirty years before, in 1965 his movements to avoid the 'deceptive enchantments of language' had led him to resign his position as the head technical writer for a major corporation in order to board a Yugoslavian freighter that would take him from New York to Europe. In his journey across the ocean, having set keel to breakers, Heller settled in a small house in a small village in Spain and whilst unpacking his books he took up his copy of George Oppen's *The Materials* (New Directions, 1962). The last poem of that collection, 'Leviathan', opened with the line 'Truth also is the pursuit of it':

I read the line over and over, like a chant, feeling a raw ache in my chest. What did the words mean to me? I had only the vaguest idea, but also a sense of wanting to weep. I calmed myself down and began to decipher my response. I took the "it" of the line as art, hunger, the clarification of the very confusion I was experiencing.

That hunger for clarification is the thread which runs seamlessly through this new selection of Heller's work and it gives tangible reality to the words of Walter Benjamin which Heller had placed as the epigraph to his 1997 essay 'Notes on Lyric Poetry or at the Muse's Tomb':

Translating the language of things into that of humans entails not only translating silence into audibility; it means translating the nameless into the name.

*Telescope* presents us with a wide selection of poems ranging from the mid-1960s to the recently written 'Colloquia' with its opening reference to that haunting presence of Oppen which has pursued the poet down the years:

“World, World,” you wrote,  
as though martyred to the visible,

the words one chose  
would have to say it.

If the famous rosy-fingered dawn  
existed, it existed to be proclaimed,

as did the catalog of phrases to embrace,

sheer gorgeousness and vibratory  
power of words

to upend those imprisoning  
geometries of the conventional.

That “World, World” offers a murmuring echo of that use of ‘it’ which had so moved Michael Heller back in the mid-1960s and it provides a frame within which the developing poetry of a man committed to dropping an anchor into the abyss can be realised with the type of clarity a reader would wish for from a serious selection of a poet’s work.

In Toby Olson’s fourteen poem sequence ‘Etudes’ the literal is transcribed as he and Miriam found themselves in a new city:

pinning for those earlier days  
in which what’s left behind is prelude  
that remains still in memory

That stillness, captured so often by George Oppen and Charles Reznikoff, is juxtaposed in Olson’s work with the days which ‘are counted toward an ending’. In Michael Heller’s awareness of movement which he contemplates in ‘Thinking of Mary’ (1997) he celebrates the world of journeying as Mary Oppen moves into a new life after her husband’s death:

You moved from  
the bedroom shared with him into a smaller space, futon

on the floor, as though recalibrating yourself. Perhaps  
you were listening there for the new life growing, growing

back like a circle on itself or like the ocean's recurrent tidal  
sweeps.