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# Tailor-Made Traditions: The Poetics of US Experimental Verse

Université Toulouse II-Le Mirail, 25 janvier 2013

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# Tailor-Made Traditions: The Poetics of US Experimental Verse

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- 1 The conference “Tailor-Made Traditions: The Poetics of US Experimental Verse” was held on Friday, January 25 in Toulouse. The committee and participants sought to explore the way poets (re)fashion the poetic tradition in which they wish to inscribe themselves, through the intermingling of their critical and theoretical writings, their works of poetry and prose, as well as their epistolary and/or social relationships.
- 2 In their opening remarks, Philippe Birgy, director of the research group Cultures Anglo-Saxonnes (CAS, Université Toulouse II-Le Mirail), Nathalie Cochoy, director of “Poéthiques” (CAS, Axe 5) and Clément Oudart, the conference organizer, welcomed a panel of scholars from a variety of institutions and nationalities (American, British, and French). They stressed the underlying tension between tradition and experiment, brought to the surface through a study of various poets, including American poet and scholar Michael Heller, himself a presenter at the conference.
- 3 One of the main goals of the conference was to analyze modernist and avant-garde poets’ strategies of reclamation and re-appropriation of their literary peers. The presentations took a variety of forms, from traditional talks to lively conversations on the nature and function of poetry itself. Much like the poets studied over the course of the conference, the presenters encouraged interaction with a diverse audience made up of poets, researchers, teachers and students.
- 4 The day concluded at Dickinson College, where Sylvie Toux, director of Dickinson’s Toulouse campus, welcomed both speakers and members of the audience for a bilingual poetry reading by several of the conference participants (David Herd, Jane Augustine, and Michael Heller), whose works were translated and read by scholars (Olivier Brossard, Clément Oudart, and Pascal Poyet). Following lively discussions and close examination of poetic re-appropriation, this literary event brought the conference to a close with a representation of re-appropriation in action, manifested through the

translation of words, ideas and forms from one language to another through written and spoken poetry.

## Jane Augustine (Independent Scholar, NYC), “H.D.’s Poetics of Magic and Psychoanalysis during World War II”

- 5 An editor and critic of Hilda Doolittle’s works, Jane Augustine started out by commenting on how appropriate the site of Toulouse was for the conference. The Occitan language, which penetrated English and influenced H.D.’s fusion of poetry and magic, was used in the troubadours’ works embodying the divine union of masculine and feminine, and is still spoken by the elderly all around Toulouse.
- 6 Adopting a contextualist approach, Jane Augustine demonstrated how the evolution of H.D.’s poetry coincided with her growing intellectual and spiritual knowledge. She detailed how the gifted artist, the conduit of the divine, needed physical relationships to reach a “super consciousness,” an “over-mind.” Stressing the importance of the female body, she recounted how H.D. was blessed with vision when carrying her child and reminded the audience of the prominence of intense sexual passion in her poems of the 1920s. “Greek ecstasy” was soon abandoned and H.D. went to Freud for writer’s block. Highlighting the significance of this event, Jane Augustine concluded that the poet’s desired union with the Mother was transferred onto Freud. Her training in psychoanalysis and a meeting with a medium gave way to a new persona in 1941. Jane Augustine explained that H.D. thought she was endowed with a psychic gift; with her psychoanalytic training interpreting dreams, the poet was convinced that she needed to use her skills to help end the war. Jane Augustine finally suggested that H.D.’s belief that her poems were beyond criticism allowed her to continue to write without uncertainty.

## Antoine Cazé (Université Paris Diderot), “The Translation Paradigm in H.D.’s Writing”

- 7 As an introductory remark to his presentation, Antoine Cazé stated that although H.D. is still a marginal figure in France, she is becoming more widely read in the country. What is being read, however, is problematic. Antoine Cazé asserted that translators, publishing houses, as well as series and anthologies of American poetry have become “consecrating mediators” creating a context for the reception of H.D., which largely tones down the subversive aspect of her work. Her interests in Hellenism, occultism, and lesbianism, for example, have been simply erased by translators. Antoine Cazé observed that the combination of these very dimensions in H.D.’s work is indicative of an “aesthetics of translation” typical of her writing.
- 8 Antoine Cazé identified a paradigm in translating H.D.: her work so thoroughly re-appropriates ancient culture and images that her rewriting itself becomes a translation. She tried to transmute Sapphic lyrical style to suit her modernist spiritual needs. This “unfaithful” translation, Cazé argued, was a transgression, a means to further explore occultism and lesbianism and destabilize notions of authorship. The scholar went on to examine what he called H.D.’s “translational drive,” a system of

displacements and transgressions. He asserted that it results in an androgynous writing space in which H.D. can come to terms with her liminal self. Cazé concluded his speech by pointing at the complexity and subtlety of H.D.'s writing and how translating her work could consequently be an intricate task.

## David Herd (University of Kent), “The View from Gloucester: Open Field Poetics and the Politics of Movement”

- 9 David Herd began by pointing out how Charles Olson was unusual in addressing physiology and resistance (both as a political act and as the resistance of words) coexisting in a complex field of relations in which bodies stand their ground and statements are set down visually on the page. His aesthetic departure (death camps) establishes the primacy of space in response to war. David Herd explained that Olson's manifesto can be at odds with itself at times and does not provide a trouble-free guide into his poems. It is not a map, but it does lay out his writing process and the complicated issues with which he continuously deals. David Herd detailed the manifesto's emphasis on body, space, movement, and the finitude of the human form. There is a use of the contemporary language of physics, an articulation of space in which nothing is left out. He then explained how man is largely estranged from the physical condition that constitutes his existence and how history is the new localism.
- 10 David Herd stressed the poems' chiasmic structures and ended explaining how the discourse of heterogeneity is not a sufficient response to the issues Olson was facing. There may be a need for a new understanding of what the postmodern is; the question of the *polis*, the organization of the political body.

## Hélène Aji (Université Paris Ouest Nanterre), “‘If you know what they mean, / things make sense’ (Bob Perelman): Language Poetry vs. Conceptualisms”

- 11 Hélène Aji began the second session of presentations with an examination of the debate between the Language poets, who started publishing in the early 70s, and the Conceptual poets, a younger avant-garde movement, focusing specifically on experimental structures of discourse and issues relating to language itself. The Conceptual poets, according to Hélène Aji, explore means through which to copy and appropriate the language of others with the goal of “repurposing, re-organizing, and recontextualizing pre-existing texts.” The simple act of writing, however, carries a sort of responsibility for the language used and the words written; thus, the Conceptual poets rely on the reader to decipher the meaning of coded texts. The example provided is that of Craig Dworkin's “Parse,” a reaction, according to Hélène Aji, to Charles Bernstein's poem “Parsing.” In the former, meaning is not derived from the words themselves; rather, the reader is left to unveil the meaning behind this poem—or rather, this representation of a poem.
- 12 The act of presenting the structures of language without their prescribed meanings—the signs without the signifiers traditionally attached to them—embodies the political

message of conceptual writing. Hélène Aji's second example was Dworkin's "Perverse Library" which presents a list of texts sorted in alphabetical order of their publishers. Since he does not specifically state his reasoning, Dworkin's goal—"generating a corollary discourse about the agendas of publishing companies, their preferences and their policies"—must be inferred by the readers. These are just two examples of ways in which Conceptualist poets, occupying an ambiguous position between subject and object, subvert the implicit references behind words and try to evoke the unattainable "thing/Which is."

## Ross Hair (University of East Anglia), "Models of Order: Form and Cosmos in the Poetry of Ian Hamilton Finlay and Ronald Johnson"

- 13 In his presentation, Ross Hair discussed another kind of opposing poetics, focusing on issues of order and space and the way in which language constructs these differing concepts. The debate was led through a correspondence between two poets, Ian Hamilton Finlay and Ronald Johnson, who ultimately disagreed on the ways in which poetic form ideally manifests itself. Although Johnson remarked in an interview that his friendship with Finlay ended when he had said "everything was circles" and Finlay had responded that "everything was squares," Ross Hair looked beyond the surface values of these fundamental differences and indicated that the conflict between the two was due to a much deeper struggle over conceptions of cosmos and harmony in the world.
- 14 Among other examples, Ross Hair provided two contrasting poems—which, on the surface, appeared to maintain similar values with regard to these main issues of space and form—in order to reveal the fundamental difference that eventually separated them. Ross Hair compared Finlay's "Wave/Rock" and Johnson's "The Different Musics," arguing that each poem, in form and in language, explores "the interactions of the different musics of earth and air by exploiting [...] the page's margins." However, their treatment of these interactions is completely different: whereas the elements of Johnson's poem seem at first romantic and unbalanced, Finlay's wave and rock "counter-balance each other, creating a state of mutual arrest." It is this emphasis on creating order in chaos that separates Finlay from Johnson. As Ross Hair concluded, however, it was their opposing beliefs that made the relationship between these two poets most interesting: opposites attracted in this dialectical relationship, creating a powerful connection.

## Olivier Brossard (Université Paris Est Marne-la-Vallée), "Tradition and the Collective Talent: Ted Berrigan's Sonnets"

- 15 In honor of the publication of Ted Berrigan's *Sonnets* in the American poetry series that he runs through French publisher *joca seria*, Olivier Brossard focused on the poet's struggle with "how to say 'I'"—how to represent individual experience and make it accessible to readers; or, in other words, how to convey emotions through words. Berrigan's poems, in his own words, are "about 'me'"—his own experiences as he

interprets them. Olivier Brossard tied this “crisis of the self” to a larger historical tradition surrounding this issue and credited Berrigan for his significant influence on the Language poets studied throughout the rest of the conference.

- 16 According to Olivier Brossard, this struggle for self-identification is expressed in *The Sonnets* primarily through an incorporation and reappropriation of other poets’ works in his own poems. He argued that Berrigan conveys his most personal messages “when he weaves someone else’s lines into his poems.” Olivier Brossard demonstrated this by playing recordings of Berrigan reading his poems aloud and creating a sort of “Game of Authors,” inviting the audience to guess the title of the original poem from which Berrigan drew his inspiration. In this way, Olivier Brossard imitated some of the methods of the poet in question, encouraging listener participation in order to extract information and identify elements and themes of the poems that Berrigan rewrites and, later, upsets.

## Will Montgomery (Royal Holloway, University of London), “Robert Creeley’s Refusals”

- 17 Will Montgomery’s presentation focused on the use and effects of compression in Robert Creeley’s poetry of the 1950s and 1960s. While numerous critics have equated Creeley’s characteristic concision with a lack of philosophical weight, Montgomery identified instead a form of refusal—refusal to utter; refusal to narrate; refusal, in short, to reach communicative plenitude—rooted in an intense disbelief in and disapproval of the dominant culture of 1950s America. In a radical self-editing movement revisiting the Poundian gesture of *condensare*, Creeley simply refuses to speak the language of an expansionist, consumerist, and oppressively conformist culture he loathes and, therefore, to resort to anything but an utterly damaged version of American vernacular speech. Thus, the poet’s commitment to short form (short lines, short stanzas and short poems), his extensive use of ellipsis, compulsively truncated lines, anacolutha, etc. ultimately speak of something—a refusal—which cannot otherwise be registered in language. Meaning, Will Montgomery argued, is to be found negatively, off the page, in what the poem refuses to say.
- 18 In order to support his claim, the speaker drew on Creeley’s substantial 1950s correspondence with both Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams. He read for instance from a most infuriated letter in which the young poet, writing a few months after the beginning of the Korean War, vehemently voiced his rejection of the 1950s United States and the values it stood for. Eventually, as a way of illustrating and completing his presentation, Will Montgomery offered an in-depth analysis of the effects of compression in two short poems—“For W.C.W.” and “A Piece”—written by Creeley in the mid-1960s. The audience was able to hear the voice of Robert Creeley himself reading both poems thanks to a series of recordings played by Will Montgomery throughout the presentation.

## Fiona McMahon (Université de Bourgogne), “*This Constellation is a Name: a Conversation with Michael Heller*”

- 19 Fiona McMahon’s contribution to the conference took the shape of a conversation with widely published and read American poet Michael Heller. The exchange—a shorter version of a long dialogue begun a few weeks earlier—gave the participants the opportunity to engage in the exploration of the weave between tradition and experimentation in Michael Heller’s writing. Before picking up the thread of the conversation, Fiona McMahon shared a few introductory words with the audience, starting out with a quote from one of Michael Heller’s essays in which the poet defines his art as being 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.” For Fiona McMahon, Michael Heller’s recently published volume of collected poems, *This Constellation is a Name*, exposes the poet as a figure constantly involved in the act of renaming, revisiting words, journeying among the signs of language that past and present writers have inscribed before him. Reading through such a substantial collection, the reader might eventually gain a sense of Michael Heller’s itinerary in and among words.
- 20 The outset of the conversation sought to address the question of geography in relation to the poet’s experience of language. Thus, Fiona McMahon wondered to what extent the cultural geographies of Michael Heller’s career (American, Diasporic American, European) have worked as a site of poetic formation. The poet’s response pertained to what he envisions as a poetic of errancy seeking to explore the dialectic between historical rootedness and uprootedness. Stressing the importance of the links that tie poetic experiment to intellectual inquiry in Michael Heller’s writings, Fiona McMahon then wondered how one accounts for both the logical rigor of a philosophical mode and the larger abstraction or uncertainty inherent to the lyric. In response, Michael Heller spoke of the poet’s course as being led by the “experimental and experiential modality of words.” He also mentioned how his relationship to language has to do with dealing with the phantoms floating around words. Thus, the poet’s task would be to expose the “haunting” of language. Next, the speakers interrogated the notion of lyricism. Can the lyric be paralleled with the experience of being lost? Is lyricism to be understood as an expression of *lostness*? Michael Heller suggested that for him, the human condition itself is to be understood as an expression of *lostness*. He equated the situation of the lyrical with both “the possibility of seeing a path to freedom” and submitting language to an expression of *lostness*. Fiona McMahon’s last question was related to the origins of one’s poetic impulse. Is the source of poetry (as Heller has said of Charles Reznikoff) “less the bookshelf than the sidewalk”? As a response, Michael Heller commented on the fundamentally physical and dynamic aspect inherent to his way of writing. He identified strong ties between ambulation, the figure of the *flâneur* and the act of composing poetry.

## Michael Heller (New York University), “Now-Time Poetics: Under the Sign of Benjamin”

- 21 Michael Heller’s speech was an excerpt from a longer work begun in January 2012. Thus, the poet and essayist chose to share with the audience the expression of a very personal take on the figure of Walter Benjamin, whose thought and life story he first encountered in Spain in the mid-1960s, when Irish novelist Aidan Higgins gave him a copy of Benjamin’s *Illuminations*. On several occasions throughout the presentation, Walter Benjamin was identified, alongside George Oppen, as a major influence on Michael Heller’s intellectual itinerary and writings. In fact, one can infer that Heller’s decision to write the libretto for an opera based on the life of Walter Benjamin (*Constellations of Waking*, 2000) was most certainly the expression of an enduring fascination for both the work and life of the German thinker.
- 22 Michael Heller spoke of a Benjaminian poetics springing from the thinker’s errancy. Here, Michael Heller was not so much referring to Benjamin’s physical wanderings across Europe, but rather to his intellectual and psychic journeys, his ever-dynamic refusals, his changes of mind. His thought was indeed defined as utterly erratic, constantly refusing to be summarized, distancing itself from pre-established discourses and systems of ideas. For Michael Heller, such a distancing—or, as he phrased it, “intellectual homelessness”—parallels and defines in essence the situation of the modern poet. Michael Heller suggested that for Benjamin, the poet’s strength finds its origins in his ability to resist the *zeitgeist*. The speaker then moved on to discuss at length the Benjamin-Baudelaire nexus. According to Benjamin, Baudelaire’s images articulate a sense of “petrified unrest,” a sort of stoppage, a moment of uncertainty as to what is to follow, through which the poet gestures towards what might be envisioned as a example of “now-time” poetics.
- 23 Program available online : <http://w3.cas.univ-tlse2.fr/spip.php?article283>
- 24 Poetry reading: [http://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite\\_toulouse\\_ii\\_le\\_mirail/lecture\\_de\\_poesie\\_bilingue\\_david\\_herd\\_jane\\_augustine\\_michael\\_heller.11651](http://www.canal-u.tv/video/universite_toulouse_ii_le_mirail/lecture_de_poesie_bilingue_david_herd_jane_augustine_michael_heller.11651)

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## AUTEURS

**JÉRÉMY POTIER**

Université Toulouse II-Le Mirail