These Shining Themes

The Use and Effects of Figurative Language
in the Poetry and Prose of Anne Michaels

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Abstract

This study explores the manner in which Anne Michaels uses figurative language, particularly metaphor, in her poetry and prose. In her first novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, and in certain of her poems, Michaels demonstrates the powers of language to destroy and to recuperate. For her, metaphor is not simply a literary device; it is an essential mechanism in the creation of an authentic story or poem. Moreover, in contrast to other figurative language such as euphemism, which she feels can be used to conceal the truth and make moral that which is immoral, metaphor in her view can be used to gain access to the truth and is therefore moral. Thus, as this study demonstrates, Michaels proposes as well as utilises the moral power of language.

The ideas of four language theorists provide the basis of this study, and prove highly useful in application to Michaels's work. With the aid of Certeau and Bourdieu, we examine Michaels's participation in and literary presentation of the relationship of domination and subordination in which people seem to interact and which takes place partly through language. In the light of Ricoeur's explication of the precise functions of metaphor, we discuss *Fugitive Pieces* as a novel whose engagement with the topic of the Holocaust in intensely emotive and figurative language makes it controversial in terms of what may or may not constitute the appropriate manner of Holocaust literary representation. Klemperer's meticulous, first-hand study of the Nazis' use of the German language during the period of the Third Reich proves illuminating in our exploration of the works of Michaels that feature themes of oppression and dispossession.

In certain of her poems, Michaels stands in for real people and speaks in their voices. This is also a form of metaphor, this study suggests, as for the duration of each poem Michaels requires us to imagine that she is the real-life person who expresses him- or herself in the first person singular, which she patently is not. We could see this as appropriation and misrepresentation of those people's lives and thoughts; however, with the aid of the notion of empathic identification we learn that Michaels's approach is always empathic – she imaginatively places herself in various situations and people's positions without ever losing her sense of individuality and separate identity, and her portrayal of their stories is always respectful and carefully considered.

Keywords

The metaphor guides the poet down the twisting and sudden neural paths
between conscious and unconscious, between personal and social,
between memory and meaning.

(Michaels 1992: 96)

I don't think we take in ideas unless they're attached to an emotion,
and I believe that images are the best, richest conduits for emotions that we have.

(Michaels, in Crown 2009)

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