

## Introduction

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*Knowing something's made up  
while thinking that it matters is what all fiction insists on.*  
(Gopnik 2006: 158)

Contemporary Canadian author and poet Anne Michaels gave courses in Creative Writing at the University of Toronto before the commercial success of her own fiction and poetry allowed her to stop teaching full-time (Crown 2009). If we were to go back in time and attend one of those courses we would have a better than usual chance of writing a decent piece of literature using the information that we receive from her there. We return to the significance of the term 'decent' in this context in the Conclusion of this doctoral thesis. The instructions Michaels provided in these classes were clear and precise, and they constitute indications of the ways in which she herself went about writing at the time, and continues to go about writing to this day. In our hands their implications would be potentially profound; in Michaels's hands the potential is realised.

'Don't be in a hurry to start writing'; forbid 'self-indulgent' prose, 'each fact must have its necessity';<sup>1</sup> 'allow your characters a certain amount of freedom'; to circumvent a 'brick wall', simply 'start from a different place'; avoid plotline chronology – 'start not necessarily at the beginning'; failure can be useful if it has you 'pushing and exceeding your own boundaries' (Michaels, in Ogden 2004). These are some of Michaels's suggestions for would-be authors, which she follows as well. Two other pieces of her advice serve as significant pointers to the discussions that ensue in this doctoral thesis.

First, 'pick a major historical event that will shape your characters and their relationship to the world around them', Michaels (in Ogden 2004) counsels. The Second World War informs the stories of the two narrators in Michaels's first novel, *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), while her more recently published second novel, *The Winter Vault* (2009), features the relocation of the Abu Simbel temple necessitated by the Aswan Dam construction of the 1960s, linked with the reconstruction of Warsaw following the war and the building of the St Lawrence Seaway in Canada in the late 1950s. Nazi and Soviet oppression are historical events that also feature in some of the poems in Michaels's three volumes of poetry – *The Weight of Oranges* (1986), *Miner's Pond* (1991) and *Skin Divers* (1999), published together in the book *Poems* (2001) – as do her considerations of the lives of certain real people who contributed significantly to the development of the world in their chosen fields, including art, literature and science. Kepler's astronomical discoveries, the Curies' investigations in physics and chemistry, and Modersohn-Becker's innovative paintings, for example, can thus be seen as 'major historical event[s]' (Michaels) in their own right (see further below).

Second, Michaels (in Ogden 2004) suggests that students need to 'decide on a series of persistent motifs that will run through [their] novel' – such as 'geology, history, poetry, music [and] language'. This idea may seem to relate to the form of a text, but for Michaels (in Ogden 2004) the motifs are 'more than mere literary devices' – as 'metaphorical tools', they can 'give [the

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<sup>1</sup> Michaels (in Ogden 2004) also seems to suggest that the practice of poetry writing could usefully precede the writing of a novel. Poetry 'is such a good discipline for a novelist: it makes you aware that even if you have four or five hundred pages to play with, you mustn't waste a single word', she explains (Michaels, in Ogden 2004).

students'] characters depth'. In other words, Michaels believes that the motifs play a significant role in the content of a text as well. In this way they can also, and in Michaels's case they do, serve as vehicles for conveying philosophical, sociological and ethical conclusions that stand to enhance our understanding of ourselves as living, interacting and dying human beings.

There is another element relating to Michaels's motifs and metaphorical language that she upholds as equally significant. She demonstrates the precise way in which metaphor works most successfully. While many authors can dazzle us with wordplay and original imagery, these figures of language may simply exist in a text for their own sake – they might not further a character's argument, develop the plot, flesh out the characters themselves or present us with reflections of our own behaviour and meditations on the consequences thereof. For Michaels (1994: 14), each component of a metaphor must make sense within its context in order for all of them to work, authentically, as a whole. Thus, for example, she sees any landscape as a story, and any story or poem (any poetic story) as a landscape: both are 'cross-section[s]', 'archaeological/geological slice[s]' whose density 'reflect layers of time as well as meaning' (Michaels 1992: 96).

In keeping with her 'sense of the poem as a slice of time', for Michaels (1992: 98) the abovementioned poems about real-life subjects are 'biographical "monologues"', demonstrations of the ways in which she explores how 'a life can embody an age, historically and geologically'. Through metaphor, Michaels is able to stand in for or speak in the voices of these people for the duration of each pertinent poem; through metaphor Michaels asks us to pretend to believe that for the duration of each pertinent poem the voice of the narrator *is* the voice of the real person about whom she has written the poem. She is able to interweave the historical and the personal in this way, taking the lives of eminent people from the past, who are all deceased, and making their voices speak again in the present. In *Fugitive Pieces*, she interweaves the historical and the personal by portraying the lives of two men, who could so easily have been real men (one a Holocaust survivor and the other a child of concentration camp survivors), from the more recent past that is also a past whose influence she recalls experiencing in her own childhood home several years after the end of the Second World War (Michaels, in Jardine 1998).

In terms of her writing style, Michaels's fictional sentences and lines of poetry are not noticeably long or complex. The words are 'plain', as Michaels (in Crown 2009) herself describes them more than a decade after having gathered them into the cluster that constitutes her first novel. The meanings of the words 'rain' and 'night', for example, and the concept of making are accessible meanings, and the idea of material possession seems to be something that all children learn when they start to distinguish themselves as individuals from every other individual around them and concurrently begin to perceive toys or food, for example, as 'theirs' and not anyone else's. The meanings of the words 'time' and 'guide', and of the concept of sightlessness, are equally understandable.

The preceding word groups comprise, respectively, the beginning of the first line of one of Michaels's more concise poems and the first sentence of the first narrator's narrative in *Fugitive Pieces*, both of which exemplify her characteristic style. The first example is made slightly more complicated by my explanation, but the meaning of the sentence that Michaels forms with them is easily graspable: 'Rain makes its own night', we are told by the narrator of 'Rain Makes Its Own Night' (32).<sup>2</sup> In this way, Michaels subtly describes the darkness, the reduction of light, that comes about with the falling of heavy rain, or 'hard' (Rain Makes Its Own Night 32) rain, as the narrator subsequently calls it. In using the verb 'to make', in the present tense, and 'own' as an

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<sup>2</sup> Quite a few of Michaels's poems from which passages are quoted in this doctoral thesis are fairly long, stretching over several pages. Thus, the number of the page in the three-volume collection *Poems* (Michaels 2001) is provided as source reference rather than the line number in each case.

adjective indicating possession, Michaels not only gives the rain human attributes, but also differentiates it from the noun 'night' as the succinct description of the stretch of time that we experience without the presence of the sun. There is nothing to menace us in this sentence, unless we dislike night-time and therefore do not wish to contemplate it in a new form. For those of us who enjoy the night hours, in the poem's opening line Michaels perhaps also hints at an atmosphere of seclusion and, possibly, comfort in this first phrase, which is brought to fruition in the latter part of the line: 'long mornings with the lamps left on' (Rain Makes Its Own Night 32).

By contrast, the second example perhaps requires an explanation. Jakob Beer, the first of *Fugitive Pieces*'s two narrators, suggests that 'time is a blind guide' (FP 5). In this way Michaels arranges just five words in a sentence to signify several things. Instantly and simultaneously we learn of a guide that is not human; of a guide that paradoxically is unable to 'see' and thus seems unable to fulfil its helpful task; of a guide who indeed *is* able to do its task, as established by the simple present-tense declarative form of the sentence; and of a guide that possesses the identity of one of humankind's most widely utilised constructs for understanding existence and measuring its progression.

As these examples show, Michaels uses plain words in evocative and imaginative positions in sentences with the result that they become elements of figurative language whose meanings are thereby made many and varied. Moreover, with such figurative language, Michaels is able to engage with the ethical implications of the historical and modern events and human experiences that she portrays.

In the course of this doctoral thesis, we encounter the following thoughts of Michaels on metaphor, which she expresses in reference to poems, but which I suggest can be extended to refer to novels as well: We discover her belief that metaphor is an essential component, indeed, the 'genetic key', to the 'whole organism' of the poem (Michaels 1992: 96). We receive her understanding that metaphor is *the* mechanism by which the poet presents her perceptions to her readers and through which the readers can absorb those perceptions for themselves (Michaels 1994: 14). We are perhaps made uneasy by her idea that the euphemism, as a figure of speech, conceals the truth of an event by stripping the event of its 'ethical consideration' and thus portraying it as less horrific, for example, or less serious or less abusive than it actually is (Michaels 1994: 15). She feels, moreover, that the euphemism is immoral in doing so (Michaels 1994: 15). We are perhaps reassured by her concomitant idea that the metaphor, as a figure of speech, reveals the truth of an event by paying close attention to the event's 'ethical consideration' and thus portraying it – through the two-fold process, as we see in subsequent chapters, of simultaneously presenting similarity and difference, showing what the event is and is not – as it really is (Michaels 1994: 15). She feels, furthermore, that the metaphor is moral in doing so (Michaels 1994: 15).

The coming discussions confirm Michaels's faith in figurative language, but the above statements alone demonstrate just how valuable Michaels perceives metaphor to be. As a tool of language that is far more than simply a tool, metaphor would constitute a fascinating topic of study in itself. However, I suggest that other functions of metaphoric language with regard to history, sociology, philosophy and ethics that come to light in the following chapters with specific reference to Michaels's work provide an even more significant and worthwhile basis for study. Moreover, while the Holocaust is also undoubtedly an important subject, as Michaels herself and many other writers and witnesses have shown, it is given a position in this doctoral thesis that is subordinate to the foremost topic of the use and effects of metaphor in Michaels's poetry and

prose. In this doctoral thesis, in other words, I wish to examine in detail Michaels's awareness of how and why certain others use metaphor, and how and why she uses it herself.

In this Introduction, I introduce Anne Michaels as the contemporary Canadian writer whose poetry and prose is the broad material for this study. Michaels's particular views on and use of metaphor, I explain, is the basis on which this doctoral thesis rests, because for Michaels metaphor is the essential vehicle for presenting her perceptions and engaging with her audience at the emotional and intellectual levels. The study is supported by an examination of language theory as expounded by four language theorists, and extended by the application of elements of these theories to certain of Michaels's many poems and to her first novel. Her second novel is discussed briefly in the Conclusion of this doctoral thesis. Furthermore, I hereby describe the content of each chapter.

I initiate the study in Chapter 1 by examining figurative language from the perspectives of three French language theorists, and language in a highly specific context from the perspective of a German philologist. Michel de Certeau (1984), Paul Ricoeur (1977; 1992) and Pierre Bourdieu (1991) help us to understand better the workings of language in general and metaphor in particular, while Victor Klemperer (2000) gives us acute, first-hand insight into the workings of the German language in the hands of the Nazis during the period of the Third Reich.

In Chapter 2, I apply the theories that are explored in Chapter 1 to some of Michaels's texts. The discussion broadens to encompass other theories that furthermore illuminate Michaels's project, namely, Susan Gubar's (2002) presentation of the notion of empathic identification and Diana Fuss's (2003) concept of the corpse poem. The chapter ends with an examination of Michaels's 11 'living-poems', a term that I coin in this doctoral thesis to label more simply Michaels's technique of metaphoric-empathic autobiography. Above, we have found that she calls these poems 'biographical "monologues"' (Michaels), but they seem to have greater dimensions than are implied in this description. In the 11 poems, Michaels stands in for and speaks in the voices of the real-life people who serve as the poems' subjects, and thus these poems are autobiographical. But they are metaphorically so, because even when we read 'I' in the poem in which the Impressionist painter Renoir refers to 'himself', for example, we never lose sight of the fact that it is Michaels who has written the poem 'On the Terrace' and who clearly is not Renoir. Nevertheless, for the duration of these 11 poems each time we read them, we can take the narrators *to be* the real-life people that Michaels portrays.

We now briefly look at the biography of each of these people. The narrator of 'January' is the Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel (1525–1569). The poem's starting point is Brueghel's completion of the painting called 'Hunters in the Snow', part of a series of 'The Months or Seasons' commissioned by merchant and patron Nicholas Jongelinck (Zagorin 2003), only five of which remain today. The poem is entitled 'January' because this painting was intended to represent that month in the calendar series. In the poem, Brueghel directly addresses Giulio Clovio,<sup>3</sup> with whom he worked while living for some months in Rome in 1553 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (EB) 2008). Brueghel implies the significance of this experience in his comment that

my heart is everywhere. In the front room with Mayken,<sup>4</sup>  
and in Italy with you. (January 27)

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<sup>3</sup> Giulio Clovio (1498–1578), Italian miniature painter and priest.

<sup>4</sup> Mayken, Brueghel's wife, was the daughter of Pieter Coecke van Aelst, a leading sculptor, architect and designer of tapestry and stained glass to whom Brueghel was at first apprenticed (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* (EB) 2008).

The poem is an imaginative dialogue, a ‘hypothetical dialogue’ (January 27) as Brueghel sees it, between himself and Clovio based partly on his invention of Clovio’s responses and partly on their actual experiences together. It also presents some of Brueghel’s thoughts on his current work.

The poem ‘The Weight of Oranges’ is quite possibly narrated by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891–presumably 1938). This is the conclusion at which we can arrive after considering the following factors: In *Poems*, Michaels (2001: 189–90) provides A Note on the Text for ‘Sublimation’ (Doebelin), ‘A Lesson from the Earth’ (Kepler), ‘Modersohn-Becker’ (Modersohn-Becker), ‘Blue Vigour’ (Blixen), ‘Stone’ (Czechowska), ‘What the Light Teaches’ (Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam and Akhmatova), ‘The Second Search’ (Curie) and ‘Ice House’ (Scott) (see further below), briefly explaining the details of these people’s lives that are pertinent to the poems. As we see in Chapter 2,<sup>5</sup> she also acknowledges the usefulness in her research of the biographies of Marie Curie and Kathleen Scott, and the log entries of Captain Watson (Michaels 2001: 191). This leaves ‘January’, ‘The Weight of Oranges’ and ‘On the Terrace’ among the group of 11 poems that are not mentioned in either the *Poems*’ Notes or Acknowledgements.

‘January’ is undoubtedly narrated by Pieter Brueghel – not only is the poem addressed to Clovio by way of an epigraph, the narrator also exhorts Clovio to

send me some of your Italian light,  
...  
... the kind we labelled ...  
... “dawn, the day Pieter Brueghel left for home.” (January 28)

‘On the Terrace’ is, conclusively, narrated by the painter Renoir, as we see below.

‘The Weight of Oranges’ has as an epigraph a quotation from one of Mandelstam’s poems, which is the first clue that the narrator may be the poet himself. Mandelstam founded the Acmeist school of poetry in collaboration with the Russian poets Anna Akhmatova and her husband Nicholas Gumilev; the school ‘rejected the ... abstraction of Russian Symbolism and demanded clarity and compactness of form’ (EB 2008). Such an enterprise distinguished Mandelstam from the official Soviet literary establishment and little of his work appears to have been published in Russia while he was alive. In 1934 he voiced a derogatory epigram about Stalin<sup>6</sup> to a small circle of friends, no doubt aware that to the ruling party the recitation ‘was the equivalent of the most frightful and potentially contaminating gaffe’ (Shirazi 2003: 206).<sup>7</sup> Everyone around him would agree that what he said about Stalin was true, but in presenting the view in the form of a poem he ‘made its offensiveness a thousand times more serious’ (Shirazi 2003: 206). One of those friends betrayed him: He was arrested soon after giving the recitation.<sup>8</sup> Traumatized by harsh interrogation, he was exiled for the first time, with his wife Nadezhda,<sup>9</sup> to a small provincial town (EB 2008; Shirazi 2003). Having served his sentence, Mandelstam returned with Nadezhda to Moscow, but he was arrested again a year later while in a rest home (EB 2008). Thus in 1938 he was exiled for the second time, without Nadezhda and much further

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter 2, page 69.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Stalin (1879–1953), secretary-general of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1922–53) and premier of the Soviet State (1941–53). Successor of Lenin (see Chapter 3, page 120, footnote 24).

<sup>7</sup> As Said Shirazi (2003: 205) sees it, by the time Mandelstam came to recite the Stalin poem, ‘he believed his days were already numbered because of his earlier verse’. Mandelstam went ahead with the recitation because he ‘did not want to pass without having spoken his mind’ (Shirazi 2003: 205).

<sup>8</sup> The ‘same night’ of the recitation ‘Stalin knew of it’ (Wesling 1992: 109).

<sup>9</sup> Nadezhda Yakovlevna Mandelstam (1899–1980), Russian writer and educator, who wrote two memoirs about her life with Mandelstam.



away, and the precise circumstances and day of his subsequent death are unclear (EB 2008; Shirazi 2003; Strakhovsky 1947; Struve 1971; Wesling 1992).

Further clues to Mandelstam being the narrator of ‘The Weight of Oranges’ seem to be as follows: The narrator describes the poem itself as a letter of ‘dry tears, to honour [himself and his addressee] like a tomb’ (The Weight of Oranges 35). This could be a reference to a ‘letter’ that Mandelstam addressed, silently or literally, to Nadezhda during his second exile. Rain features at the start of the poem (The Weight of Oranges 34) and is portrayed at the end as the trigger of the ‘letter’ he writes; sometimes he pretends that his addressee is ‘in the other room/ until it rains’ and then this – the poem –

... is the letter I always write:  
The letter I write  
when they’re keeping me from home. (The Weight of Oranges 37)

The narrator is ‘ashamed of [their] separation’, of the ‘hundreds of miles’ between himself and his addressee (The Weight of Oranges 35, 36). He blames himself for that turn of events, having ‘burned/ every house [they] had, with a few words to start the flames’ (The Weight of Oranges 35).<sup>10</sup> During the traumatic interrogation preceding his first exile Mandelstam was asked ‘which poem of [his] [did] [he] think might have caused [his] arrest’ – in response he ‘recited three of his poems, suppressing the eight most dangerous lines of one of them’ (Shirazi 2003: 201). The interrogator had ‘not even heard two of them’, but since he then heard them he ‘copied them down for the record’ (Shirazi 2003: 201–2). Believing that his ‘words of wood,/ ... had no power of their own’, in the poem Mandelstam further expresses the belief that it is “‘the important’” that gives them meaning (both from The Weight of Oranges 35), referring perhaps to that fateful, shocked circle of listeners, the Stalinist government, Stalin himself and the interrogator.

Significantly, according to Said Shirazi (2003: 209), this meaning is rendered null by some of the same people, the ‘regime’, that is, who had ‘a devouring curiosity’ for what he wrote ‘not for what any of it means, rather only to be assured that all of it means nothing; to them it all means nothing’. Mandelstam was one of the thousands killed ‘not because they were any threat to the regime but simply because thousands must be sacrificed to keep millions living in fear’ (Shirazi 2003: 209). Such meaninglessness seems to be reiterated in Michaels’s poem ‘What the Light Teaches’, where we encounter an example of the dovetailing of fact and fiction so characteristic of Michaels’s writing in the form of a line from Mandelstam’s poem ‘We shall meet again, in Petersburg’:

Petersburg ... became  
an invisible city where poets promised to meet  
so they could pronounce again  
“the blessed word with no meaning.” (What the Light Teaches 125–6, citing Mandelstam)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This shame could perhaps be rooted in the voices that Mandelstam heard while he and his wife were being transported to Cherdyn, the town to which he was initially exiled: The voices ‘told him that he had sentenced to death everyone who had heard his poem [insulting Stalin], that he had effectively murdered his wife and all of his friends’ – ‘examine your conscience, the voices told him’ (Shirazi 2003: 206).

<sup>11</sup> The lines of Mandelstam’s (date unknown (d.u.)) poem from which Michaels quotes are as follows:

We shall meet again, in Petersburg,  
as though we had buried the sun there,  
and then we shall pronounce for the first time  
the blessed word with no meaning.

...  
I will pray in the Soviet night  
for the blessed word with no meaning.

While the conclusion is not foregone, these aspects of the poem certainly seem to indicate that Mandelstam is the poem's narrator, and in subsequent relevant discussions I take this view. One last suggestion on the issue remains: Leonid I Strakhovsky (1947: 63) believes that while Mandelstam may at first seem to be 'introspective' as a poet, 'in reality he is impersonal' – 'the "I" in his poetry may not be Mandelstam at all, but merely a reflection of himself as provided by his imagination'. I think it is possible that Michaels is aware of this aspect of Mandelstam's poetry, as identified by this and other critics contemporary to Mandelstam,<sup>12</sup> and uses it to influence the poem she writes in his voice.

The poem 'Sublimation' is narrated by the German writer Alfred Doebelin (1878–1957), perhaps best known for his novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (1929). His addressee, his 'shadow bride' (Sublimation 67), is the photographer Yolla Niclas (dates unknown (d.u.)) (Michaels 2001: 189), with whom the married Doebelin is said to have had an affair (see, for example, Simon 1992). The poem mainly explores the nature of his intense bond with Niclas, but his experience of Germany, his motherland, as a Jew and a Socialist, before and during the Second World War plays a significant role in the poem as well. Doebelin felt compelled to leave Germany first for France in 1933, and then for America in 1940 (EB 2008), and 'was one of the few exiled writers who made the difficult decision to return after the war', Michaels (2001: 189) explains in her Notes. The decision is a pivotal element in the poem. However, and this is not mentioned in the poem, it seems he could not reconcile with his home, because he finally resettled in Paris in the early 1950s (EB 2008).

The narrator of 'A Lesson from the Earth' is the German mathematician Johannes Kepler (1571–1630). Among his many other achievements, Kepler discovered three characteristics of planetary motion, which he saw as 'celestial harmonies that reflected God's design for the universe' (EB 2008). Today, they are called 'laws'; they not only 'freed thought by marrying astronomy and physics for the first time', but also 'pav[ed] the way for Newton's theory of gravity' (Michaels 2001: 189). These laws are rather complex, even when made more accessible to the layperson by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (2008), and they need not be listed here. In the poem Kepler sums up their significance and implications as follows:

... the entire planetary system  
rests on the plainest pattern.  
...  
... the Church must someday give up  
hundreds of perfect circles,  
for the simple, blasphemous ellipse.  
...  
measure not from the earth but from the sun.  
...  
God's eternal clue:  
...  
the moon not less in its halfness. (A Lesson from the Earth 74–8)

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(Oddly enough, most of (the few) internet sites that present the English translation of this poem are personal blogs. I took these lines from a random choice, of the blog [audiopoetry.wordpress.com](http://audiopoetry.wordpress.com), which acknowledges that the poem was translated from the Russian by Clarence Brown and William Stanley Merwin. Elsewhere on the internet Brown and Merwin are acknowledged as the translators of the *Selected Poems of Osip Mandelstam* (2004) (<http://books.google.co.za>), though the poem itself is not made available at this site.)

<sup>12</sup> Leonid I Strakhovsky (1947: 64) cites two other critics, Zhirmunsky and Selivanovsky, who also highlight the impersonal quality of Mandelstam's poetry.

While highlighting certain historical events and personal experiences, as well as an apparently difficult relationship with Kepler's predecessor, Tycho Brahe,<sup>13</sup> the poem provides a broad view of Kepler's life and scientific standpoint.

The German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) narrates Michaels's poem by the same name. As much as she was able to, Becker pursued her interests in art from an early age, though her parents insisted that she train for a career in teaching and pressurised her to lead a life more suitable for a woman according to the conventions of the time. Nevertheless, in her early 20s, she was able to join the Worpswede school, a group of regional artists who lived in a colony near Bremen (EB 2008). There she met Clara Westhoff, with whom she formed a close and ongoing friendship and who married the poet Rilke.<sup>14</sup> She also met and in 1901 married Otto Modersohn.<sup>15</sup>

In her short adult life, Modersohn-Becker visited Paris three times; her work was informed by the post-Impressionist art that she saw there, particularly that of Cézanne<sup>16</sup> (EB 2008). She became 'increasingly dissatisfied with the aims of the Worpswede artists' (EB 2008), indeed representing, in a letter to her husband upon her arrival, the reason for her visit to Paris in 1903 as 'to learn to see Worpswede through more critical spectacles' (Busch & Reinken 1983: 291). This attitude, combined with her parents' opposition to her work (an ambivalent stance on their part, as we see in Chapter 3)<sup>17</sup> and her difficulty in reconciling her role of artist with that of wife, quite possibly led to her decision to leave her husband and settle in Paris in 1906, though she remained financially dependent upon him. Modersohn followed her there, and in 1907 she returned to Worpswede with him. At the end of that year she died as a result of cardiac arrest caused by an embolism in her leg, several days after giving birth to their daughter.

The narrator of the poem 'Pillar of Fire' is British sea captain Watson of the HMS *Charles Bal*. The dates of his birth and death are unavailable, but evidently he lived in the 19th century because as an adult he witnessed first-hand the Krakatoa explosion of 1883 from the deck of his ship. Michaels (2001: 191) acknowledges that the poem is based on Watson's log entries. In the poem, Watson intersperses descriptions of the devastating geological effects of the eruption with recollections of sea journeys with his father in the same area. The poem serves also as a direct address to his father.

The Danish writer Karen Blixen (1885–1962), who published her stories under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen, speaks in the first person in the poem 'Blue Vigour'. Blixen married her cousin, Baron Bror Blixen-Finecke, in 1914, and together they started a coffee plantation in Kenya. She contracted syphilis from her husband and had to return to Denmark for several months of treatment (Donelson 1999b). Blixen and the Baron were divorced in 1921, and she continued to run the farm by herself for a further 10 years before accepting defeat – the plantation was troubled by 'mismanagement, drought and the falling price of coffee' (EB 2008) – and returning

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<sup>13</sup> Tycho Brahe (1546–1601), Danish astronomer. Kepler was Brahe's assistant at the time of the latter's demise, and in *Heavenly Intrigue: Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahe, and the Murder Behind One of History's Greatest Scientific Discoveries* (2004), Joshua and Anne-Lee Gilder claim that Kepler poisoned Brahe (Roeder 2005: 559). By contrast, Kitty Ferguson, author of *Tycho & Kepler: The Unlikely Partnership That Forever Changed Our Understanding of the Heavens* (2002), links Brahe's death with self-medication, and points out that Kepler faithfully fulfilled Brahe's dying plea – 'Let me not seem to have lived in vain' – though he did so in his own way (Roeder 2005: 560).

<sup>14</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Austro-German poet. According to Robert Hass (in Rilke 1982: xiv), in her youth the poet Marina Tsvetaeva wrote a letter to Rilke in which she calls him 'poetry itself'.

<sup>15</sup> Otto Modersohn (1865–1943), German painter, one of the first to arrive in Bremen and form the Worpswede school (EB 2008).

<sup>16</sup> Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), French painter.

<sup>17</sup> See Chapter 3, page 134.



to Denmark. She recorded her experiences in and deep ties with Africa in the well-known memoir *Out of Africa* (first published in 1937). During her time there Blixen met and seems to have fallen in love with Denys Finch Hatton.<sup>18</sup> The poem is addressed to him while they conduct their affair and immediately following his death.

As mentioned above, ‘On the Terrace’ is narrated by the French painter Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919). The name of Renoir is not stated in the poem, but we know the precise identity of the narrator – clearly a painter – for the following reasons: Gabrielle Renard, ‘a distant cousin’, initially invited to the household ‘to help with the children’, also attended to Renoir later in his life (renoirgallery.com). In the poem, the narrator describes how ‘Gabrielle wraps’ his hands, almost totally debilitated by arthritis, ‘in powdered gauze, to stop the chafing’ of the paintbrushes (On the Terrace 103; described in renoirgallery.com). Gabrielle also modelled for the painter (renoirgallery.com), and the poem’s narrator concedes that she ‘gains twenty pounds under [his] brush’ (On the Terrace 103). Renoir recollects certain artistic experiences in the poem and meditates on his artistic role at this advanced stage of his life. ‘Now that I have no hands, I long for clay,’ he comments (On the Terrace 105); in real life, Renoir fulfilled this urge by directing one or two assistants in working the clay (theartgallery.com.au).

In ‘Stone’, Lusia Czechowska (d.u.) reminisces about the painter Modigliani<sup>19</sup> as an artist in his own right, for whom she modelled, but also as her lover. The details of Czechowska’s life are not easily ascertainable. While Linda Lappin (2002: 792) describes her as Polish, Michaels (2001: 190) presents her as a Russian émigré. Though there is evidence that she published her journals or memoirs (see artifact.com; kahbonn.de; Lappin 2002; Mann 1980), with the exception of one extract<sup>20</sup> the actual texts seem to be untraceable. And the nature of her relationship with Modigliani is itself inconclusive. Michaels evidently takes it to be sexual – Czechowska remembers it in the poem as characterised ‘not [by] passion’ only ‘at first’ (Stone 107) and by desire ‘clinging like windy paper to [their] legs’ (Stone 108). Carol Mann (1980: 164–6), by contrast, describes Czechowska as the ‘closest friend’ of the Zborowskis<sup>21</sup> and the wife of ‘a poet and a revolutionary, who was away at war’, and relates that Modigliani reportedly ‘made declarations of love to her but that she resisted his advances’. Elsewhere Czechowska is also described as ‘one of his most loyal and treasured friends’ (artifact.com).

Modigliani was a sculptor as well as a painter. Michaels’s poem is titled ‘Stone’ rather than something to do with painting perhaps because, as Czechowska sees it, while ‘paint submitted to [his] frenzy’,

... limestone loved him perfectly,  
resisted with integrity, showed him  
what to do. ... (Stone 109)

Michaels’s poem ‘What the Light Teaches’ confirms, as we learn in Chapter 4,<sup>22</sup> the fact that the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova also had an affair with Modigliani (Akhmatova & Austin 1989).

The narrator of ‘The Second Search’ is Polish-French chemist and physicist Marie Curie (1867–1934). As a girl, Maria Sklodowska was gifted with a ‘prodigious memory’ and gained an

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<sup>18</sup> Denys George Finch Hatton (1887–1931), English big-game hunter.

<sup>19</sup> Amedeo Modigliani (1884–1920), Italian painter and sculptor.

<sup>20</sup> In this oft-cited extract, Czechowska describes what seems to be her first experience of modelling for Modigliani (see, for example, Mann 1980: 164).

<sup>21</sup> Zborowski was Modigliani’s ‘friend, art dealer and part-time patron’ (Lappin 2002: 796).

<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 4, pages 189–90.

excellent secondary education (EB 2008). Financial difficulty owing to her father's bad investments plagued her early adult life, but she managed to educate herself and her sister, and gained accolades in the field of physics. She met and married Pierre Curie,<sup>23</sup> and together they discovered polonium and radium. With her husband and Henri Becquerel,<sup>24</sup> she was awarded the 1903 Nobel Prize for Physics and in 1911 she was the sole recipient of the Nobel Prize for Chemistry. Pierre Curie's sudden death<sup>25</sup> was a 'decisive turning point in her career' (EB 2008), but it is Curie's personal loss to which the poem pays closest attention. In the poem, she addresses Pierre directly. While she recalls details of their life together, she seems to concentrate on the time – perhaps a few weeks – immediately following his death, as is attested to by the epigraph (The Second Search 159; in Nichols-Pecceu 2000: 874), which is a quotation from her (real) 1906 mourning journal in which she confesses to being unable to fully grasp the fact of that occurrence.

In the poem 'Ice House', British sculptor Kathleen Bruce Scott (1878–1947) also addresses her recently deceased husband, Robert Falcon Scott.<sup>26</sup> Having been educated at the Slade School of Art in London and at the Academie Colarossi in Paris, where she 'learnt to sculpt with Rodin' (spri.cam.ac.uk), she was already established in her career when she met the man who became her husband. Two years later, she travelled with him to New Zealand, in order to send him off on the British Antarctic Expedition that intended to be the first group of men to reach the South Pole. He did reach it, only to find that Roald Amundsen<sup>27</sup> had been there about a month before. In 1913 Scott learned that her husband had died the previous year on his return journey from the South Pole. As implied by the poem's epigraph – in which she 'regret[s] nothing but [her husband's] suffering' (Ice House 164) – she supports his work away from her and their son. He 'reached farthest south,/ and then [he] went further', but 'in neither of those forsaken places/ did [he] forsake [them]', she feels (Ice House 167). The bronze statue that Scott made of her husband is in Waterloo Place, London, while the marble statue of the same design is situated in Christchurch, New Zealand (spri.cam.ac.uk), testament to her description in the poem of having taken his

face in my hands and your fine  
arms and long legs, your small waist,  
and loved you into stone. (Ice House 166)

Such are the backgrounds of the people in whose voices Michaels speaks in the 11 particular poems. 'January' and 'The Weight of Oranges' come from Michaels's 1986 volume *The Weight of Oranges*. We find 'Sublimation', 'A Lesson from the Earth', 'Modersohn-Becker', 'Pillar of Fire', 'Blue Vigour', 'On the Terrace' and 'Stone' in her 1991 volume *Miner's Pond*. 'The Second Search' and 'Ice House' appear in her third and most recent volume *Skin Divers* (1999). Of these poems, only 'A Lesson from the Earth', 'Modersohn-Becker', 'On the Terrace' and 'Stone' do not have a specific addressee. There are two other poems by Michaels whose subjects are also real people: 'The Day of Jack Chambers' and 'What the Light Teaches'. But these poems are not narrated, respectively, by Jack Chambers,<sup>28</sup> and by the Russian poets Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova (see further below), and therefore they are not included in subsequent discussions of the particular nature of the 11 abovementioned poems.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Curie (1859–1906), French physical chemist.

<sup>24</sup> Henri Becquerel (1852–1908), French physicist, who discovered radioactivity.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Curie was run over by a cart in a Parisian street, the Rue Dauphine, and died instantly (EB 2008). In the poem, Curie describes him as being 'carried/ home from Rue Dauphine, half [his] skull/ hardened into pavement' (The Second Search 159).

<sup>26</sup> Robert Falcon Scott (1868–1912), British naval officer and explorer.

<sup>27</sup> Roald Amundsen (1872–1928), Norwegian explorer.

<sup>28</sup> Jack Chambers (1931–1978), Canadian painter and film-maker.

Certain other poems are also discussed, briefly or in some detail, in this doctoral thesis. In ‘Lake of Two Rivers’, the narrator recollects holiday trips to Algonquin shared with her<sup>29</sup> parents and her sibling(s). Rather than being an actual, single lake, Lake of Two Rivers appears to be another name for the Algonquin Provincial Park, which is one of the ‘oldest’, ‘largest’ and ‘most famous’ parks in Canada (campsource.ca). Some four hours’ distance from Toronto, the 8 000 square kilometre area comprises ‘wild and beautiful lakes and forests, bogs and rivers, cliffs and beaches’ (campsource.ca). The narrator interweaves her personal memories with historical events in this poem. For example, as we find in Chapter 2,<sup>30</sup> the River Neman features both in the narrator’s father’s recounted memories and in the narrator’s own discovery of a Holocaust-related event. This is a narrative style that, as we learn in the following chapters, is highly significant and prevalent in Michaels’s work.

‘Anna’ is a poem about the death by drowning of a teenager with whom the narrator seems to have been distantly acquainted. It is arguable whether the event is a suicide or an accident. The narrator of ‘Words for the Body’ is a writer, and her addressee is a pianist. In the poem the narrator reminisces about their lifelong friendship, highlighting pivotal moments of failure, success and enlightenment in their artistic ‘performances’. In the former poem, Anna’s death serves as a trigger for the narrator’s exploration of the significance of naming in the mourning process, and in the latter poem the artistic and more mundane moments that the narrator pinpoints support Michaels’s perspective on the potentially beneficial functioning of memory. Mourning and remembrance, as well as their facilitation in language, are extremely important ideas in Michaels’s work that we explore in detail in the coming chapters.

In ‘Miner’s Pond’ the narrator contemplates her sibling relationships; she intersperses childhood memories with images from the world of science and references to explorers of that world, such as Pasteur,<sup>31</sup> Einstein,<sup>32</sup> and the Curies. The poem’s elegiac air is introduced in its dedication to ‘the memory’ (Miner’s Pond 55) of someone who may have been a relative of Michaels’s, as the surname is the same.<sup>33</sup> The title of the poem ‘Phantom Limbs’ is a metaphor for the old and broken down buildings of a city on which the narrator focuses with affection. She aligns herself and her addressee with these buildings, describing both the

... Places in us  
old light still slants through to (Phantom Limbs 92)

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<sup>29</sup> It is not obvious that the narrator of ‘Lake of Two Rivers’ is female, but I presume so, based on evidence such as her identification with her mother:

When she was my age  
her mother had already fallen through.

Pregnant, androgynous with man,  
she was afraid. When life goes out,  
loss gets in, wedging a new place. (Lake of Two Rivers 10)

The image of ‘falling through’ seems to symbolise death, here; and the narrator’s mother was ‘androgynously’ pregnant presumably because she would be giving birth to a boy. This poem is an example among a few of Michaels’s poems in which the narrator’s gender is not conclusive. In each of these instances I choose to assume that the narrator is female, for various reasons – for example, because I wish to avoid using the potentially cumbersome ‘he or she’ style, because at times the sensory focus of the images and events seems feminine, and because some of Michaels’s other unnamed narrators are clearly female.

<sup>30</sup> See Chapter 2, page 108.

<sup>31</sup> Louis Pasteur (1822–1895), French chemist and microbiologist.

<sup>32</sup> Albert Einstein (1879–1955), German-born American physicist.

<sup>33</sup> The name is Elie David Michaels (Miner’s Pond 55).

and their love for

... the abandoned distillery:  
...  
... high rooms  
run through with swords of light. (Phantom Limbs 93)

Because the narrator of the poem ‘What the Light Teaches’ (121) refers to herself and her addressee as ‘our father’s daughters’,<sup>34</sup> we know that the poem is narrated by a woman and is addressed to her sister. The poem is set on the sister’s farm, presumably in Canada, and extends points touched on in ‘Lake of Two Rivers’. The narrator interweaves recollections of visits to the farm, and her family’s related personal experiences and history, with meditations on Nazi and Soviet oppression, mainly in terms of language. In this regard she highlights the well-known modern Russian poets Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941), Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966), all of whose work was considered subversive to the ruling Soviet government in the early to mid-20th century.

As with ‘Lake of Two Rivers’, ‘What the Light Teaches’ is a typical example of Michaels’s longer work in that it merges personal or particular elements with historical or international elements. It also illustrates, as does *Fugitive Pieces*, the capacity of language to carry both history and memory, with the specific traits that Michaels attributes to each of these things, as we see from various viewpoints in the following chapters. Like Michaels’s other texts, the poem is rich in figurative language, significance and implications. There is much that can be said about each metaphor, but I do not attempt to explore all of them in the poem. As we have seen above, from Michaels’s point of view, there are certain metaphors that can be used to present her main ideas, and it is these ideas with which we are also concerned. Thus in this doctoral thesis there is some repetition in quotations from the poem. In Chapters 2 and 3, the discussions are necessarily incomplete and rather specific; in Chapter 4 we closely examine the poem’s major themes, images and intentions.

Like ‘Rain Makes Its Own Night’ and ‘Phantom Limbs’, the poem ‘Wild Horses’ seems to approach in intensity what Michaels (1992: 97) calls the ‘ideal’ short poem, which she describes as an instance of ‘concision that heightens complexity, without obscurity or reduction, a glint of profundity ..., in language that brands itself into memory, musical and charged’.<sup>35</sup> The poem is based on the discovery of the ancient cave paintings in Lascaux, France. It serves as a particular example of Michaels’s literal and figurative engagement with time, a subject that evidently fascinates her. Concluding with the image of ‘the strap of river/ dig[ging] into the flesh of field’ (Wild Horses 145), the poem embodies her poetic ‘attempt to achieve horizontal flow and vertical descent at the same time, seeming effortless as a river searing its way through hills over time’ (Michaels 1992: 97). This poem is used in Chapter 2 in the service of applying Ricoeur’s theories on metaphor to Michaels’s work.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kimberly Verwaayen (2000) at first identifies the addressee of this poem as the narrator’s ‘childhood/lifelong friend’, but if that were the case Michaels would have distinguished two fathers, as in, ‘our fathers’ daughters’. However, later in her article Verwaayen (2000) states that the narrator presents ‘reminiscences of a sister figure ... and their shared experiences’ in the poem.

<sup>35</sup> Michaels (1992: 97) believes that this ideal is ‘so far out of reach that it makes [her] head ache and [her] limbs nervous’, but it appears that her respect for her material, for her characters and for her readers (see, for example, Michaels, in Crown 2009) dictates that she make the attempt towards achieving this ideal every time she writes a text.

<sup>36</sup> See Chapter 2, pages 73–5.

Finally, in ‘The Hooded Hawk’ (171), the narrator pays tribute to an addressee whose ‘writing life’ reveals her to be a writer. Michaels (2001: 191) names the source of the quotations that she provides in this poem as Adele Wiseman,<sup>37</sup> specifically the author’s novel *Old Woman at Play* (1978). The most autobiographical of Wiseman’s work, this novel ‘provides aesthetic insights into her [other] novels, combining descriptions of her mother’s dollmaking and ... speculations [of her own] on artistic creativity’ (Boyd no date (n.d.)). Wiseman’s ‘abiding concern with encouraging and nourishing creativity in any form, at any age’ forms the basis of this book, which Alan Belkin (2008), a family friend of long standing, sees as being precisely ‘about her mother’. Wiseman’s mother was presumably the ‘old woman’ of the book’s title, who was perpetually ‘at play’ because she continued to sew dolls up to her death – ill with cancer, Chaika Wiseman would ‘quietly sew into the night, talking to whoever was there in the simplest way, exuding a gentle tolerance at once naive and yet ... profoundly sophisticated’ (Belkin 2008). As ‘The Hooded Hawk’ (172) shows, in *Old Woman at Play* Wiseman wrote of her mother’s death:

“my loss is endless ... its only closure  
will be my own.”

Wiseman’s parents were Russian-Jews who fled to Canada in order to escape the pogroms that took place during the Russian Civil War (1918–20) in the Ukraine. As is evidenced by the poem’s dedication – ‘for A.W.’ – and by phrases such as ‘your mother’s dolls’ (both from ‘The Hooded Hawk’ 169), Wiseman appears to be the addressee of the poem.

In the Master’s dissertation that precedes this doctoral thesis, I explore the dual powers of language, namely, the powers of destruction and recuperation, as presented by Michaels in *Fugitive Pieces*. In Chapter 3 of this doctoral thesis, I add a third component: enacting good. The discussion of Michaels’s demonstration of the destructive power of language is supported by Elaine Scarry’s (1985) theories of physical pain, and Scarry and John Berger’s (2001) ideas about the practice of torture. The concomitant discussion of Michaels’s demonstration of the recuperative power of language is illuminated by Scarry’s (1985) theories of the act of creation. Finally, with the aid of Martha Nussbaum (1985) and Henry James (1937), we discover the additional aspect of the nature of Michaels’ work, which is the moral power of language.

Chapter 4 focuses on Michaels’s major poem, ‘What the Light Teaches’, which features crucial images, metaphors and themes that, as we have seen above, convey her equally important historical, sociological, philosophical and ethical understandings. Language serving as a home in this poem is one such metaphor, and we investigate whether it appears in any of Michaels’s other texts. The metaphor would seem to apply directly to the Romanian Holocaust poet Paul Celan, because he had an extremely difficult relationship with German as the language that was both his treasured mother tongue and the language of the people who dispossessed him during the war of all that is normally considered to be essential for life: family, home and freedom. While the work and poetic approaches of Celan and Michaels share certain characteristics, Celan is used mainly as a foil in this chapter in order for Michaels’s work to be further illuminated. The chapter includes a brief discussion of the biographies of the three real-life Russian poets who are referenced in the poem, as well as a close reading of the poem.

In the Conclusion of this doctoral thesis, I sum up the main points that are discussed in the preceding chapters while briefly looking at Michaels’s second novel, *The Winter Vault*. I close

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<sup>37</sup> Adele Wiseman (1928–1992), Canadian novelist, whose work shows the influence of her Russian-Jewish parentage (Boyd no date (n.d.)). Michaels wrote the Afterword of Wiseman’s first novel *The Sacrifice* (originally published in 1956, republished in 2008), the ‘moving and complex story of Abraham, an orthodox Jew with Old World values whose life turns to chaos and tragedy in the New World’ (Boyd n.d.).



with a broad description of the efficacy of Michaels's particular views on and uses of metaphor, and a review of the ways in which we ourselves may follow her multi-faceted example to similar effect.