

Chapter 4

Michaels's poem 'What the Light Teaches' – learning the lesson of the light

Poems are gifts to the attentive.
(Celan 2003: 26)

In Chapter 2 we have examined the use of metaphor in Holocaust literary representation, and see that several noteworthy critics and writers believe that metaphor plays a highly significant and useful role therein. For Michaels, metaphor is essential in *any* creative writing.¹ She explains that if we think of a poem as 'attempting to clone an emotional, intellectual and visceral event, then it's the metaphor that serves as the genetic key to the whole organism' (Michaels 1992: 96). By extension, perhaps we can think of a novel as 'attempting to clone' (Michaels) a series of such events. One of Michaels's striking metaphors is of language as a home, and the poem from which it comes, 'What the Light Teaches', embodies her successful 'attempt to clone' an instance of the accomplishment of a lesson – the lesson of the 'light' in the poem's title – towards which the poem's narrator progresses through a collection of emotional, intellectual and visceral 'events',² as we see below.

Michaels presents the metaphor in the following verse:

Language is the house with lamplight in its windows,
visible across fields. Approaching, you can hear
music; closer, smell
soup, bay leaves, bread – a meal for anyone
who has only his tongue left.
It's a country; home; family:
abandoned; burned down; whole lines dead, unmarried.
For those who can't read their way in the streets,
or in the gestures and faces of strangers,
language is the house to run to;
in wild nights, chased by dogs and other sounds,
when you've been lost a long time,
when you have no other place. (What the Light Teaches 128–9)

In the present chapter, we explore whether the idea of language as a home features also in *Fugitive Pieces*, in some of Michaels's other poems, and in the life and work of the Romanian-born Jewish poet Paul Celan. Unlike Michaels, Celan experienced the Second World War first-hand;

¹ Michaels finds figurative language useful also in non-fiction, as some of her short essays or articles demonstrate. In 'Cleopatra's Love', for example, she describes 'the metaphor' as 'electric as a filament' in its 'join[ing] [of] disparity' (Michaels 1994: 14).

² I intend the quotation marks enclosing the word 'events' to indicate that we should not take the term too literally. Moreover, the *COED* (2004) defines 'visceral' as either 'to do with the viscera', the main internal organs of the body, or as 'relating to deep inner feelings rather than to the intellect'. Because Michaels (1992: 96) already listed the adjective 'emotional', it would seem that by 'visceral' she intends the first definition, implying all things (accurately) related to the inner workings of the body. However, Michaels has a particular interest in the relationship between the body and the mind and the heart – the physical, the intellectual and the emotional – that precludes a clear distinction between these three aspects of people as human beings, and thus the few examples of visceral events that I suggest can be found in the poem, which we explore in the course of the present chapter, are not literally visceral.

although the language he uses in his poetry is as figurative as is Michaels's, his form of identification is often more sympathetic than empathic, whereas her form of identification is wholly empathic, as we know. While there are some similarities between Celan and Michaels's approach to writing poetry, and between his life and that of some of her narrators, in the present chapter he is used primarily as a foil to Michaels and her fictional and poetic characters.

Paul Celan – the foil

Paul Celan was born in 1920 in Czernowitz, the main city in the province of Bukovina that was governed initially by the Austrian empire, then by the Romanians and ultimately by the Soviet Union (Felstiner 1985: 44). At the express wish of his father, Celan was brought up to speak pure German, and at school was educated in Romanian, French and Hebrew (Felstiner 1985: 45). The Soviet occupation of Czernowitz in the early and again in the final stages of the war facilitated his acquisition of Russian (Felstiner 1985: 45). Throughout the war, Celan was put into forced labour in various places around his home city, and by chance he escaped a 1942 Nazi round-up in which his parents were transported into the German-occupied Ukraine, where they were killed a few months later in a Nazi labour camp (Felstiner 1985; Hamburger, in Celan 1995; Langer 1995). Celan learned Yiddish from his fellow labour camp inmates, and took up English studies, particularly the work of Shakespeare, towards the end of the war (Felstiner 1985: 47). Just after the war, he earned a living by translating the texts of Russian writers into Romanian, and later by producing German translations of Romanian, French and English texts (Felstiner 1985: 47, 48). He moved from his home city, by then officially part of the Ukraine, to Bucharest and then across Hungary to Vienna. He finally settled in Paris, where he lived until his suicide in 1970.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, while Jakob hides from the Germans in the Biskupin forest, orphaned and homeless, he has 'no other place' (What the Light Teaches 129); and when he finally approaches Athos, he has 'only his tongue left' (What the Light Teaches 128): His use of his tongue – his cry of 'dirty Jew' (*FP* 13) in the three languages he can speak – convinces Athos that he is a living boy and not a mud-caked golem (*FP* 12). His 'home' has not been literally 'burned down', but in being saved by Athos and smuggled into Greece he indeed has to 'abando[n]' his 'country' (What the Light Teaches 128). The 'whole line' of his 'family' is 'dead' (What the Light Teaches 128), with the exception of himself and possibly an aunt he had never met, who is mentioned once in the story (see *FP* 59). He does not remain 'unmarried' (What the Light Teaches 128), but he and Alex do not have children, and because Michaela dies soon after he does, while she is pregnant with their first child, his entire family line is indeed cut off.

However, the brief literal and figurative 'homelessness' of his childhood does not persist. Athos becomes Jakob's guardian, and for many years it is with him that Jakob lives, in more than one house. For the most part, while Jakob's education and his subsequent work and writing are intricately concerned with language, he has more than 'only his tongue left' (What the Light Teaches 128). Language certainly helps to save Jakob, but it is not the only thing that saves him. Ben supports this view; he had 'wanted to believe [that] language itself' (*FP* 207) was the instrument of Jakob's release, but the night that they meet he realises this is not so. By contrast, Ben himself is neither orphaned nor homeless, and though his father infuses the family's world with silence, language is not the remedy for his emotional problems. This is bearing in mind, of course, that it is through language – so skilfully handled by Michaels – that we have learned of

the nature of Jakob's eventual recovery, in Chapter 3,³ and of Ben's partial achievement of emotional balance, in Chapter 2.⁴

Both poets and translators, and learning to work in languages other than their mother tongue, the historical Celan and the fictional narrator Jakob may have had similar literary experiences. Indeed, they both seem to be aware of a separation between themselves and language and between themselves and the rest of the world, at certain times in their lives. A 'heavy black outline' (*FP* 95) separated everything from its name for Jakob while he learned English and Greek, as we have seen in Chapter 3.⁵ The outline becomes a seal for him much later in life,⁶ but for Celan the division persisted – 'there is a veil between him and nature, between him and everything' (Waldrop, in Celan 2003: vii). His poems and certain of his prose texts seek to 'fill the gap and include the other side' (Waldrop, in Celan 2003: viii). His existence, his place in the world, was not assured: 'Reality is not simply there, it must be searched [sic]⁷ and won', believes Celan (2003: 16).

Like Jakob, as a result of the war Celan was orphaned and made homeless. Unlike Jakob, Celan had no guardian and saviour. He had nothing. Stripped of material possessions, parents and a home, the only thing Celan had left was language.⁸ He *was* one of the dispossessed who had 'only his tongue left', who had 'no other place' (What the Light Teaches 128, 129). German was his mother tongue but also the language of the men who killed his parents and destroyed the world as he knew it. The related dilemma – Celan's inability to be either reconciled with or free of the language – informed his literary production for the rest of his life. By now familiar to critics and students of Celan's work alike, and frequently quoted, Celan's words best acknowledge the situation: In 1958, accepting the Literature Prize of the Free Hanseatic City of Bremen in a public speech, he identifies language as the 'one thing' that remained 'secure among all the losses'; it was language that 'had to go through its own lack of answers, through terrifying silence, through the thousand darknesses of murderous speech' before it could 'resurface, "enriched" by it all' (Celan 2003: 34). Jakob experiences something similar, as he moves back to the house on Idhra following his divorce precisely in order to 'press to tearing certain questions', the type of questions that as yet for him have no answers and thus 'must be asked very slowly' (*FP* 159).

For Celan, then, language was much more than merely a tool of expression, it seemed to be his means of attempting to re-establish the innermost element that was missing: himself, in the world. His war-time experiences may have had a similar effect on him that torture had on Améry. Améry (1980) lost his trust in the world at the first blow;⁹ Celan (2003: 35) saw such loss

³ See Chapter 3, pages 132 and 150–6.

⁴ See Chapter 2, pages 95–7.

⁵ See Chapter 3, page 130.

⁶ See Chapter 3, pages 132–3.

⁷ I do not suggest that Celan made this slight grammatical error. It seems to be a typing error, because in her introduction to a selection of Celan's prose works, Rosemarie Waldrop (in Celan 2003: viii) includes the missing preposition that makes the sentence grammatically correct: 'Reality must be searched for and won'.

⁸ In descriptions of himself and his Holocaust experiences, Celan does not seem to acknowledge that he had his animate body as well, which is something that holds paramount importance for Michaels, as we have seen in Chapter 2 (page 89, footnote 68). His parents and many other Jews died, but he remained alive. Michaels (2009) confirms: 'When one is dispossessed of everything – home, country, landscape – what is left? Language, memory, one's own body'. However, as Fuss (2003: 19) explains, 'recent trauma theory reminds us that one might survive an unthinkable atrocity like the Holocaust and yet still not feel alive'. Perhaps this is what Celan felt (or, strictly speaking, did not feel); perhaps his living body was an insufficient or unfulfilling remnant of the war, a view that his suicide may be seen to support.

⁹ See Chapter 3, page 125. And like Améry, Celan had changed his name. In the two years that Celan spent in Bucharest, 'adopt[ing] the custom of adopting a pseudonym as a writer', he used the name 'Paul Aurel', then 'A

as well: Other, younger poets of the time were ‘unsheltered even by the traditional tent of the sky, exposed in an unsuspected, terrifying way’. Like them, he had been ‘racked by reality’ and remained ‘in search of it’ until his death; like them, he strove to ‘carry [his] existence into language’ (Celan 2003: 35).

As proficient as he was in various languages, Celan nevertheless believes that ‘only in one’s mother tongue can one express one’s own truth. In a foreign language the poet lies’ (Chalfen 1991: 148; in Roditi 1992: 13). We have no more than a few lines of evidence provided by Michaels,¹⁰ but because Jakob writes poetry in Hebrew, English and Greek, and not in Polish or Yiddish, he appears to disprove that notion. Though Edouard Roditi (1992: 13) calls Celan’s comment, perhaps rather imperceptively, ‘absurd’, it resonates with a search for truth that Celan also expresses elsewhere. ‘Craft’, the condition that Celan (2003: 25, 26) sees as ‘the condition of all poetry’, means ‘handiwork, a matter of hands’. And it is ‘only truthful hands [that] write true poems’ (Celan 2003: 26).

Michaels may equally uphold the value of sincerity and honesty, but is at the same time aware of the possibility, as critics have long debated on the topic of Holocaust literary representation, of the Holocaust’s unrepresentability, of the events perhaps being too horrific to be contained or restrained in language – she is aware, as the narrator of ‘What the Light Teaches’ (125) explains, that ‘the truth is why words fail’. As his writing developed, Celan, striving to make his words as truthful as possible, was frustrated by conventional words and words that were tainted by the oppressors. The new words that he formed made his language at once less and more truthful – less truthful in the context of the language existing at the time (the LTI, in Klemperer’s (2000) terms) and more truthful because it came much closer to the truth that he tried to express. Michaels feels ‘we can only reveal by outline, by circling absence’ (What the Light Teaches 125). In his poems, Celan seems instead to have delved into the centre, to inhabit and paradoxically to enact absence. ‘Indeed, speaking in the voice of the dead [as we see Celan doing, below] provides a way for poetry to make present a certain kind of absence,’ suggests Fuss (2003: 25).

‘Reveal[ing] by outline, circling absence’ is ‘why language/ can remember truth when it’s not spoken’ (What the Light Teaches 125). Perhaps Michaels is alluding in these lines, through her narrator, to the beneficial kind of remembrance that Jakob eventually learns, as we have seen in Chapter 3,¹¹ in this case remembrance of the truth rather than of the dead. Some truths are so dreadful that they slip out of language’s grasp; they cannot or should not be spoken. Some are so dreadful that they dissolve language altogether. But it is also language that can restore truths – lost among the dreadful ones (as some words are lost among ‘the noise of other words’ (What the Light Teaches 125)) – that deserve to be remembered, and be presented perhaps in another way.

If we extend to truth or truths Jakob’s realisation that ‘*to remain with the dead is to abandon them*’ (FP 170), saying, thus, ‘to remain with truths is to abandon them’, it would mean that trying to use or present truths simply as they existed before the Holocaust implies staying with them

Pavel’ and finally settled on ‘Paul Celan’ (Roditi 1992: 13). Unlike Améry, whose change of name constituted an openly defiant act, Celan seems to have selected his new name for more practical reasons: He did not wish to antagonise the Romanian audience of his first poems, who ironically enough may have found ‘Antschel’ at once ‘too German and too Jewish’ (Felstiner 1985: 47).

¹⁰ Ben’s narrative is threaded with the occasional italicised phrase, line or few lines that the surrounding context suggests are quotations from Jakob’s poems. In the paragraph following his mention of Jakob’s volume *Groundwork*, for example, Ben describes discovering one of the ‘clues of the life [Jakob] and Michaela shared’ – ‘stubs of candles, hard pools of wax in shelters of rock in the garden where [they] must have sat together at night, no doubt [Jakob’s] *cleft of stone opened by flame*. [His] images were everywhere’ (FP 266).

¹¹ See Chapter 3, pages 132 and 153.

sympathetically, the way Jakob tries to remain with Bella to the point that she accompanies him through his adolescent and young adult life. To remember the dead properly, to let them go without abandoning them, implies remembering them empathically, the way Jakob learns to know that he and Bella are different – he is alive, she is dead – and that, with the help of Michaela's empathy, he can learn how to love Bella differently. In order for truths to be remembered empathically, they need to be given new meaning. As we have seen in Chapter 3¹² and as we see below, Michaels suggests that the old words can still be used, but must be used in a new way, enriched with memory and metaphor.

In his poetry and prose, Celan seems to remember truths both sympathetically and empathically, as we now see in examining his oeuvre, which reflects his life in complex ways. Translator Michael Hamburger (in Celan 1995: 19) believes that Celan's work 'confronts us with difficulty and paradox', and over the years many other critics have attributed a hermetic quality to his poems as a matter of course.¹³ If the term is applicable, the quality could have resulted partly from Celan's connections with surrealist poetry as a medical student in France just before the war broke out and later as a translator of some of the early French surrealists' work (Felstiner 1985: 45; Glenn 1977: 522). Celan himself refused the description – for example by inscribing Hamburger's copy of his volume of poetry entitled *Die Niemandrose* with the phrase '*ganz und gar nicht hermetisch*' ('not in the least hermetic') (in Klink 2000: 2; attested to by Hamburger (in Celan 1995: 29)) – and certain critics defend his work against the implied accusation. Hamburger (in Celan 1995: 25, emphasis added), for example, argues that 'if Celan *had* set out to write hermetic poems, his work would have been less difficult than it is, because it would not require us to make the kind of sense of it that we know it can yield'.

Joanna Klink (2000: 2) defines the term 'hermetic' in relation to Celan's work as 'self-referential', 'veiled' or 'deliberately concealed', in other words, 'verse which seems to turn away from the world, which has the markings of a private language'. 'To call a poem hermetic' is to imply that 'it is not ultimately concerned with including you in its meaning', she explains (Klink 2000: 2). In his Bremen acceptance speech Celan (2003: 35) makes it clear, on the contrary, that his poems are directed at a reader or receiver: 'Poems are *en route*: they are headed toward ... something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality'.

John Felstiner (1984: 38) suggests that Celan's writing 'bears the mark of [his] experience' of exile,¹⁴ in Paris, in the second half of his life – it shows the 'strain of reaching out to find fit listeners'. This is echoed by Berger's (2001: 452) suggestion that 'to break the silence of events ... to put into words, is to discover the hope that these words may be heard'. Celan certainly wanted his words to be heard, particularly in the post-war years, the earliest of which were characterised by 'numbness, repression, denial, apathy, or expedient forgetfulness' (Felstiner 1985: 49). Facing neo-Nazism and 'unregenerate' anti-Semitism (Felstiner 1985: 54) in the 1960s, Celan (in Felstiner 1985: 54) contemplated putting an end to his writing, but decided against it, knowing what it would be like for him as 'a German-language author who has lived through the Nazi terror ... to be cut off a second time from his language'.

¹² See Chapter 3, page 137.

¹³ Felstiner (1985), Klink (2000) and Langer (1995) attest to the critics' tendency to view of Celan's work as hermetic; see also Felstiner (1986b), Glenn (1972) and Roditi (1992), among others.

¹⁴ However, Celan may have lived nomadically, like Doebelin in Michaels's 'Sublimation', more by choice than enforcement. Edouard Roditi (1992: 15) describes him as living in Paris 'as a willing expatriate, having left Soviet-occupied Czernowitz, then communist Romania, and finally postwar Austria without ever being exiled'.

The first poem Celan published, in 1947, soon became famous. His powerful ‘*Todesfuge*’ (‘Death Fugue’)¹⁵ was originally named ‘*Todestango*’ (‘Death Tango’) and was published not in German but in Petre Solomon’s¹⁶ Romanian translation ‘*Tangoul Mortii?*’ (Felstiner 1986b: 252). Its well-known first stanza tells us the following:

Black milk of daybreak we drink it at sundown
we drink it at noon in the morning we drink it at night
we drink and we drink it
we dig a grave in the breezes¹⁷ there one lies unconfined
A man lives in the house he plays with the serpents he writes
he writes when dusk falls to Germany ...
he writes it and steps out of doors and the stars are flashing he whistles his pack out
he whistles his Jews out in earth has them dig for a grave
he commands us strike up for the dance (Celan 1995: 63)¹⁸

Celan – the corpse poet

Sympathetic and partially empathic, Celan can also be seen as a, perhaps subversive (certainly not typical), writer of corpse poems (Fuss 2003: 1–30), which we have encountered in Chapter 2.¹⁹ On the one hand, his ‘Death Fugue’ is a corpse poem: ‘We’ makes it a first-person utterance, ‘we drink’ indicates that it is written in the present tense, and in being narrated by the Jews in the camps who ‘dig ... grave[s]’ and who ‘will rise into the air’ as smoke, it is indeed ‘spoken in the voice of the deceased’ (Fuss 2003: 1). The poem evidently seeks to redeem the dead, and thus it can be categorised as a redeeming political corpse poem (Fuss). Poems in this category ‘make strong moral statements about the cruelty of the living’, Fuss (2003: 13, 14) proposes. The blue-eyed man who ‘writes ... to Germany’ is undoubtedly cruel – he ‘whistles his Jews out’ exactly as he ‘whistles his pack [of dogs, presumably] out’ – and these Jews are made to drink ‘black milk’ (all from Death Fugue 63), which could signify death in contrast to the nourishing qualities of white milk.

On the other hand, despite ‘Death Fugue’ neatly fitting in with Fuss’s definitions of corpse poetry, Celan is a Holocaust poet, according to Fuss (2003: 19), for whom any kind of ‘resurrection is a lost hope’ and for whom ‘the speaking corpse [is] an indecorous and cruel fantasy’; she also presents the Holocaust as ‘mark[ing] the historical limit beyond which the corpse poem hesitates to venture’.²⁰ Moreover, while being separated, like Michaels, by the ‘distance’ of time and circumstance from the Jewish people who did die in the camps, Celan nevertheless seems unprotected, unlike Michaels,²¹ by the ‘emotional buffer’ that should ‘shield

¹⁵ John Felstiner (1986b: 249) sees this poem as ‘probably the pre-eminent lyric to have emerged from the European Jewish catastrophe’.

¹⁶ Petre Solomon (1923–1991), Romanian writer and translator; friend of Celan (Felstiner 1985: 47).

¹⁷ In a later poem, Celan refers to the Jews – ‘the human beings-and-Jews’ – as ‘the people of clouds’ (Tabernacle Window 217).

¹⁸ This poem is translated into English slightly differently by Felstiner (1986b: 250), who produces the phrase ‘grave in the air’ rather than ‘grave in the breezes’, for example. The extracts from Celan’s poetry that are quoted in this doctoral thesis come from either a secondary source, which is acknowledged in each case, or from Celan (1995), and thus henceforth the source acknowledgement for the latter is given simply as the poem’s title and the relevant page number in Celan (1995).

¹⁹ See also Chapter 2, page 105.

²⁰ In support of her argument, Fuss (2003: 19) cites Celan’s ‘Psalm’: ‘No one kneads us again out of earth and clay,/ no one incants our dust./ No one’. However, the subsequent line of that poem challenges the conventional meaning of the pronoun ‘no one’. ‘Praised be your name, no one’ (Psalm 179) suggests that ‘no one’ is a person. And a person can do something – thus, the poem’s narrator(s) are indeed ‘knead[ed]’ and their ‘dust’ is indeed ‘incant[ed]’, by someone, that is, the so-called No one.

²¹ See Chapter 2, page 107.

the poet', as Fuss (2003: 26) clarifies, 'from the contamination and contagion [that] ... proximity to the dead inevitably entails'. Counting himself among the dead, as we see him do below, Celan appears to be immersed in rather than 'shielded from' such 'contamination and contagion' (Fuss).

In fact, Celan seems driven by emotion. His mother's death devastated him in particular, and while his subsequent bouts of depression may also have had a biological cause, his wartime trauma had clear emotional repercussions, such as the depression itself, his paranoia, his persecution mania and his ongoing sense of alienation. 'The corpse poem, when it moves the reader, moves us through social outrage or philosophical argument, rarely through raw emotion,' Fuss (2003: 26) suggests. Celan's outrage at the abuse and destruction of the Jewish people, which he communicates in images like blood spurting from eyes, mouths or ears (With a Variable Key 91), and black milk and breezy graves inhabited by drifts of smoke that once were living beings (Death Fugue 63, 65), is more personal than social, and though some of us may not be moved by his raw emotion, Celan himself does not seem to feel it any the less. Thus, Celan's poetry appears to escape conclusive definition. 'Death Fugue' fits into the category of political corpse poetry of the redeeming kind, but its tone lacks the characteristic emotional distance. We must conclude, therefore, as we have concluded with Michaels's poems,²² that 'Death Fugue' is and is not a corpse poem.

By the time Michaels comes to depict the Holocaust, its facts and statistics have become well known around the world. This was not the case at the time of the event, when the distribution of reports and photographs had yet to spread around the world. The criticism that Michaels has received for her Holocaust-related metaphors in *Fugitive Pieces* was that much greater a possibility for Celan and his Holocaust-related metaphors. In immediately post-war Europe, when Germans in particular were trying to move on (Felstiner 1985), Celan's Romanian editor was aware that 'reality can swell to metaphorical excess and defy belief' (Felstiner 1986b: 252). Thus he appended a note to '*Tangoul Mortii*' confirming that the poem was based on fact, that, for example, 'in the Nazi camps some of the condemned were [indeed] forced to play music while others dug graves' (Felstiner 1986b: 252, 262 fn 10).

In 1948, in Vienna, Celan published the poem in German as the concluding section of his first volume of poetry *Der Sand aus den Urnen* (*The Sand from the Urns*). He changed the title of the poem to 'Death Fugue', referring to the musical composition favoured by Bach²³ rather than to the Argentinian dance, thereby drawing attention to the 'artfulness' (Felstiner 1986b: 253) of the poem's lines. Despite Celan's (in Felstiner 1986b: 254) efforts at both figuratively and accurately representing what had so recently been reality – he even emphasised that his 'grave in the breezes' metaphor constituted 'neither borrowing nor metaphor' – such artfulness was to the poem's detriment, to Celan's intense dismay, as the poem was soon being used in German schools to educate students not about its content, that is, the plight of Jews such as Celan's parents, but about its structure and prosody (Felstiner 1986b: 254). He believes, by contrast, that a poem's form and patterns of rhythm and sound are given – 'craft', as we know he has suggested, 'is the condition of all poetry' (Celan 2003: 25) and thus need not be privileged over (truth-striving) content.

Moreover, just as Cook (2000) and Henighan (2002) condemn Michaels for what they see as the beauty and reality-obscuring nature of her metaphors in *Fugitive Pieces*,²⁴ critics in this case praised Celan's metaphors for their beauty. They also saw them as obscuring reality, though this was not

²² See Chapter 2, pages 102–10.

²³ Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), German composer.

²⁴ See Chapter 2, pages 79–82.

necessarily a bad thing in their view – German critics seemed to assume that, living in Paris and influenced by the French surrealists or symbolists, Celan would logically shift his focus to fantasy (Felstiner 1985: 49). One German critic hailed Celan’s ‘glittering arrangements’ (Felstiner 1985: 49); another his ‘music’, his ‘fantasy’, his ‘playful freedom’ (all from Felstiner 1985: 49); while others suggested that his metaphors ‘actually screened off reality’ (Felstiner 1986b: 254), removed ‘everything concrete’ and were romanticised (Felstiner 1985: 49).²⁵

Ironically, while so obviously opposing Michaels, Henighan (2002: 149) is equally clearly on Celan’s side, defending the poet as the truly ‘courageous’ respondent to Adorno’s famous injunction about poetic barbarism in the face of any critic who hails Michaels as such. Using heavily metaphorical language himself, he praises Celan’s ‘stark’ collection *Fadensonnen* (*Threadsun*)²⁶ for doing what he sees Michaels failing to do, that is, ‘hauling concealed meanings out of common expressions, exposing the hidden cargoes sheathed by metaphorical language’ (Henighan 2002: 149). It seems both mystifying and typical that in this way Henighan disparages the poet and author who uses metaphor as a mechanism for bringing us the truth, and endorses the poet and author who uses metaphor to produce meanings that are, by almost all other accounts, ambiguous at best and incomprehensible at worst.

By the time Adorno elaborated on his injunction in 1962, saying on the radio that ‘aesthetic stylization could transfigure the horror of Auschwitz’, people generally took him to be referring to ‘Death Fugue’ (Felstiner 1985: 49). When Adorno made the original statement that was to become so well known he seems to have had no knowledge of Celan,²⁷ but when he did become aware of Celan’s work in the early 60s, ‘he recognized in [it] the very qualities he stipulated for authentic literature’ (Felstiner 1985: 49).²⁸ Moreover, as Felstiner (1986b: 258) points out, for all the misinterpretations of ‘Death Fugue’s’ metaphors by the critics over the years, the poem remains ‘for many European Jewish survivors ... the quintessence of whatever understanding they can voice after the catastrophe’ – both Améry and Levi, for example, use the ‘grave in the air’ metaphor in their own texts, in 1976 and 1982 respectively (Felstiner 1986b: 256).

For his part, Celan refuted the critics’ appraisals of his work as anything but reality-based. In response to a question about his own work in progress, he proposes that the language of German poetry in the late 1950s

wants to locate even its “musicality” in such a way that it has nothing in common with the “euphony” which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors.²⁹ ...

²⁵ In mid-1944, Celan read ‘Death Fugue’ to his friend and fellow poet Alfred Kittner, a survivor of the labour camp in which Celan’s parents had died (Felstiner 1986b: 251; Hamburger, in Celan (1995: 20)). According to Felstiner (1986b: 251, 261 fn 4) Kittner, too, found that ‘measured against the terrors [he] had barely escaped’, the poem was ‘all too artful, too accomplished’, and he told Celan as much. Fuss (2003: 26) proposes that there is ‘not a single corpse poem in which the poet ventriloquizes the voice of a deceased ... friend’. Kittner had survived the Transnistrian camp, but perhaps he found Celan’s ‘we’ in ‘Death Fugue’ too close a self-approximation to those who had not survived.

²⁶ In Ristić (2005) I state that there is no collection by that name. This is incorrect – Celan (1995) published a volume of poetry entitled *Fadensonnen* in 1968.

²⁷ Shira Wolosky (2001: 655) would disagree, proposing that ‘Adorno’s famous remark ... in fact made special reference to Celan’. Her subsequent discussion portrays Adorno’s reactions to Celan’s work as negatively critical (Wolosky 2001: 655).

²⁸ Indeed, Felstiner (1986b: 255) explains that Adorno’s editor Rolf Tiedemann told him ‘that it was Celan’s poetry itself which led Adorno in 1966 to recant specifically his famous dictum’.

²⁹ In the case of ‘musicality’ Celan may have used quotation marks in sardonic reaction to the emphasis that a critic for an ‘influential German journal’ put on the ‘music’ of ‘Death Fugue’ (Felstiner 1985: 49). In the case of ‘euphony’ Celan may have used quotation marks in reference to the music that was played during the Holocaust while extermination camp prisoners were forced to march to the crematorium, and possibly in reference to the post-war

This language ... is concerned with precision. It does not transfigure or render “poetical”; it tries to measure the area of the given and the possible. ... [This is] the working ... of an “I”³⁰ who speaks from the particular angle of reflection which is his existence and who is concerned with outlines and orientation. (Celan 2003: 15–16)

Celan’s later work reflects such precision, believes Hamburger (in Celan 1995). Structurally, the poems are characterised by “‘darkness’ ... leaps and bounds ... haltingness and ... silences’, but it is not these aspects that make them difficult to understand (Hamburger, in Celan 1995: 21). There is nothing ‘slapdash or vague’ about them, nothing in them is ‘meaningless’, ‘nothing has been left to chance or to merely emotive gestures’ (Hamburger, in Celan 1995: 21). It is the context in which they are set – where, as we know, ‘milk is black [and] death is the all-encompassing reality’ – that makes them so powerfully confront our understanding (Hamburger, in Celan 1995: 21).

In using the first person ‘we’ in ‘Death Fugue’, Celan speaks not for the Jewish victims but ‘through them’, and he uses the present tense in figuratively describing an action (‘we drink’) that took place in reality in the past (they suffered abuse and murder) – thus it is evident that he was never able to break free of ‘the Jewish fatality’ (Felstiner 1985: 44). Moreover, the lines ‘Render me bitter./ Number me among the almonds’,³¹ from the untitled, final poem in the volume *Mohn und Gedächtnis (Poppy and Remembrance)*, demonstrate that in the subsequent 18 years Celan remained ever ready to count himself ‘among the Jewish dead’ (Felstiner 1985: 48). In terms of Michaels’s expression of these concepts, Celan, refusing to ‘cut out [his] tongue’, tried to ‘cleave it with new language’ (What the Light Teaches 124).³² Listening closely to ‘a language of the dead’ (What the Light Teaches 124), Celan reiterates that language in ‘Death Fugue’.

In contrast to Michaels’s empathic identification, this is sympathetic identification – Celan is putting himself in the position of the Jews who died in the camps without sustaining the essential difference, without bearing in mind that he and each of them are not one and the same person. Indeed, if Felstiner’s (1985) view is accepted, Celan goes so far as to represent himself as dead at the hands of the Nazis. This deathly existence seems ‘real’ or literal to Celan just as his ‘grave in the breezes’ metaphor is not, to him, metaphorical and just as the ‘word’, to him, the tool of his craft, can be simultaneously personified and aligned with death, that is, can become a ‘corpse’ (Nocturnally Pouting 93), as we see further below.

However, Celan’s form of identification is not always sympathetic; he fleetingly seems to approximate empathy as well. For example, in 1942 he received a letter from his mother during her internment, telling him of his father’s death and asking for a shawl to ward off the cold. Thereafter he wrote the poem ‘Black Flakes’, in which a mother (perhaps his mother) asks her child (perhaps Celan) for ‘a shawl/ to wrap [her]self in ... when the snowdrift sifts/ [his] father’s bones’ (Celan, in Felstiner 1985: 46). Immediately following this potentially sympathetic identification is an empathic identification, in which Celan (in Felstiner 1985: 46) refers to

‘music’ (the denial or blocking-out mechanisms) that continued to be ‘played’ (exercised) by Germans wishing to forget the recent horrors.

³⁰ The ‘I’ is ‘a unique, mortal soul searching for its way with its voice and its dumbness’ (Celan 2003: 26). Berger (2001: 450) also sees poetry, in contrast to the ‘vast territory’ that is prose, as concentrating on ‘a single centre, a single voice’.

³¹ Celan uses the almond to symbolise Jewishness (Felstiner 1985).

³² It seems at times, however, that Celan felt his attempts to be futile even as he made them, because the earth-filled diggers of one of his poems ‘thought up for themselves no language’ (There Was Earth Inside Them 157).

historical events that he could not have experienced first-hand: the massacres of 1648 and the Cossack ‘Hetman with all his troop’, whose horses’ ‘hooves crush[ed]/ the Song of the Cedar’.³³

This is not to define empathic identification as *any* kind of vivid and imaginative portrayal of events in the past that the poet or author is too young to have experienced first-hand, and, correspondingly, to define sympathetic identification as such a portrayal of events that the writer could have experienced personally. Rather, while in their poems Michaels and Celan, in their different ways, *speak as* real people, the verb can be refined with regard to Celan. When Michaels speaks as Brueghel in ‘January’, for example, she speaks *as if* she were Brueghel – just as a sign can designate absence,³⁴ and as meaninglessness is a derivation and therefore an indication of meaning, as we see shortly, the ‘as’ implies the distinction of the person of Anne Michaels from the person of Pieter Brueghel. But when Celan speaks as one of the exterminated Jews in ‘Death Fugue’, for example, the ‘as’ can drop away – Celan speaks. He truly believes or deliberately decides to believe that he is one of them, but he is palpably not dead when he writes the poem, and therefore he too achieves Ricoeur’s (1977: 255) metaphorical truth: He is and is not one of the murdered Jews. He submits to an exhortation of one of his narrators, to be found in his poem ‘Speak, you also’ (101): He ‘speak[s]’, and ‘keep[s] yes and no unsplit’.

Furthermore, in his speech on receiving the Georg Büchner³⁵ Prize in 1960, Celan (2003: 48) claims that while the poem ‘speaks only on its own, its very own behalf, it has ‘always hoped ... to speak also on *behalf of ... the other, ... perhaps an altogether other*’.³⁶ Therefore Celan can refer to two forms of ‘I’, of his self: the ‘I’ he was before the war, and the traumatised and fragmented ‘I’ that the Holocaust forced him to become. Logically, and as Felstiner (1985: 44–5, emphasis added) explains, the ‘destruction’ – cultural, racial, familial destruction – that was ‘thrust upon Celan, among countless other Jews of his generation, ... constituted a destiny and *an identity* he would never have realized within a Europe free of the twelve-year Reich’. This situation may apply equally to Levi in real life, and to Jakob and Ben’s parents in *Fugitive Pieces*. Like Celan, these people became different versions of themselves – Jakob fictionally as a child; Ben’s parents fictionally and Levi genuinely as adults – as a result of their war experiences. Ben, however, is not included in this category because his life did not change so drastically over time. He is affected by his parents’ trauma from birth: ‘History had left a space already fetid with undergrowth, worms chewing soil abandoned by roots. ... [He] lived there with [his] parents [in that] ... hiding place, rotted out by grief’ (FP 233).

By writing the early poem ‘Death Fugue’ in the still recognisable German of the oppressors, Celan performs sympathetic remembrance of the truths about the Jews facing death moment to moment in the camps. At this point in the poets’ literary development, both Celan’s poetry and Michaels’s poetry are figurative and imaginative. But the traits of their work then diverge. Michaels remains steadfastly imaginative, as her subsequent poetry and latest novel also show; the ways in which she uses figurative language do not alter markedly. Celan, by contrast, increasingly finds language inadequate for what he has to say. He seems to understand, as does Michaels, that language can become meaningless in its attempt to achieve meaning. While at university in the still-foreign city of Toronto, unsettling enough a situation as it is, Jakob is embroiled in dealing with his childhood trauma. He describes his inability to explain why or how

³³ The Song of the Cedar is a ‘late-19th-century Zionist anthem’, and its mention indicates on Celan’s part ‘a painful grasp of Jewish persecution and endurance’ (Felstiner 1985: 46).

³⁴ See Chapter 2, page 70.

³⁵ Georg Büchner (1813–1837), German dramatist.

³⁶ Here too is an echo of Ricoeur’s (1992: 3) suggestion that the self, a person, ‘implies otherness to such an intimate degree’ that he or she seems to be made up of two, albeit inseparable, entities. (See also Chapter 1, page 32, footnote 28.)

he at first saw, on that momentous day, only that his parents were dead and not that his sister had vanished: In his own eyes he is the ‘touch-typist’ who produces ‘meaningless’ and ‘garbled’ words (*FP* 111).

By writing ‘in code, every letter askew’, Jakob imagines making ‘loss’ both ‘wreck’ and ‘become’ the language (*FP* 111). He contemplates, in other words, what Celan actually carries out, that is, making language describe and embody its own destruction, as in this extract from ‘Nocturnally Pouting’ (93):

A word – you know:
a corpse.

Let us wash it,
let us comb it,
let us turn its eye
towards heaven.

Being with Alex temporarily assuages some of Jakob’s pain, as we have seen in Chapter 2,³⁷ but after a few years their lack of mutual understanding becomes plain, albeit represented as it is in metaphor: Having initially ‘flooded the clearing’, the ‘finger of light poked down ... [and] illuminat[ed] nothing’ (*FP* 139). In Celan’s terms, ‘the way’ for Jakob ‘led nowhere’ (‘There Was Earth Inside Them 157’). Once again, as he did while hiding from the Nazis, he ‘stand[s] under water, [his] boots locked in mud’ (*FP* 139). Celan was also trapped. In 1963, one of his narrators (still) had ‘earth inside’ him, he was still digging; he ‘heard nothing more’, he ‘did not grow wise’, he ‘invented no song’; he digs and his addressee digs and ‘the worm digs too’ (‘There Was Earth Inside Them 157’). For the narrator, and by extension for Celan, the way would never lead anywhere, it would always lead nowhere.

Yet Celan continued to make the attempt – to search for the truth, to speak on behalf of others, to place himself among them and speak, and to reach for an approachable reader or addressee. Perhaps his search for new language was also motivated by a sense, articulated by the narrator of ‘What the Light Teaches’ (122), that ‘all change is permanent’. Anti-Semitism did not end with the cessation of the war – the words in the German language, such as ‘number’, ‘oven’, ‘Final Solution’ and so on, that the Nazis used to such negative effect will always carry those meanings when used in reference to that context. Indeed, the combination of the words ‘tattoo’ and ‘number’ in almost any context has the potential to bring to mind the image of the prisoners entering the camp bearing this mark.

As we know from the epigraph of the section on the destructive power of language in Chapter 3, Klemperer (2000: 14) feels that it will take a long time for certain words to be cleansed of Holocaust-related meaning, and some words will never be cleansed. In this light, perhaps Celan along with the narrator and her sister in ‘What the Light Teaches’ (122) ‘need words to raise [them]selves/ to new meaning’. His message becomes ‘more urgent’ but also ‘more reticent’; he conveys it in newly coined compound words, split words whose separate syllables gain new weight, fewer words altogether (Hamburger, in Celan 1995: 25) and title-less poems. His revised language is ‘at once probing and groping, critical and innovative’,³⁸ and as he becomes more

³⁷ See Chapter 2, page 88.

³⁸ As we have seen earlier in the present chapter, this is the new language that stems from Celan’s insistence on the ‘gap between him[self] and the world’, and that he uses in the hope that it ‘can fill the gap and include the other side’ (Waldrop, in Celan 2003: viii).

resourceful and familiar with it, he begins ‘strictly ... [to] confine [it] to the orbit of his most urgent concerns’ (Hamburger, in Celan 1995: 29).

In thus testing the boundaries of language, taking it to a completer completeness (Berger 2001, see below), in his later poetry Celan seems to approach a more substantial form of empathic remembrance. Ironically, he thereby received a less favourable response from his contemporaries – in using his new language he strode ahead of puzzled and misapprehending audiences. With his suicide he left them even further behind. The suicide, moreover, confirms the provisional nature of his empathic remembrance, his continued reaching towards rather than reaching, or achieving, it. He may have taught himself to use the German language differently – to remember it empathically – but up to the time of his death, unlike Jakob, he has not learnt to love the dead differently (Michaels), in other words empathically, knowing that they are dead and he is alive, and he has not learnt to use language differently to the point that he is saved by it, as Jakob has learnt to do and partly by which he is saved.

Celan does not quite ‘reach/ what breaks in [him]’ and thus cannot ‘penetrate heaven’, as described by the narrator of ‘What the Light Teaches’ (125). Jakob, seated at Athos’s desk in the house on Idhra shortly after his divorce, ‘moved closer inside [him]self, didn’t turn away. [He] clutched the sides of the desk and was pulled down into the blueness. [He] lost [him]self, discovered the world could disappear’ (FP 157). But he is not lost forever. Whereas he and Celan have both been ‘clamped/ into [their] deepest part’, only Jakob manages to ‘climb out of [himself]/ for ever’, as one of Celan’s narrators demands of the addressee in his poem ‘Illegibility’ (329). Celan (2003: 52) strove and Jakob is able to ‘take art with [them] into [their] innermost narrowness’, but only Jakob manages to ‘set [him]self free’ (Celan 2003: 52). After years of anguished contemplation, Jakob ‘fall[s] apart’ but also achieves a moment of ‘pure belief’, which is his knowledge that his ‘*brokenness has kept [Bella] broken*’ (FP 169). And then, with Michaela’s aid, Jakob achieves freedom, finally feeling ‘safe above ground’ (FP 189).

We have concluded that ‘Death Fugue’ is and is not a corpse poem. But what of Fuss’s (2003: 30) general conclusion that *all* poetry is a form of corpse poetry, because ‘every literary utterance [is] a speaking corpse, a disembodied voice detached from [the] living, breathing body’ of the poet? In May of 1960, Celan (2003: 25) still believes, ‘in principle’, that the poem and the poet are totally distinct, that ‘once the poem is really *there*, the poet is dismissed, is no longer privy’, thereby conforming to the ideas of the New Criticism, still prevalent at the time. But he seems to revise this idea in October of that year, stating that while the poem is ‘*en route*’, that is, as it moves again and again towards its ‘approachable you’, ‘the author stays with it’ (Celan 2003: 49).

As we see below, on the one hand, Michaels appears to subscribe to the New Criticism approach as well; but on the other hand, I argue, Michaels does not separate herself entirely from her texts. She ‘stays with’ (Celan) her poems and novels in their journey towards her ‘approachable’ (Celan) audience because she seems to be driven by a three-fold obligation: to her personal role in exploring social concerns in writing, to the historical material she is writing about and reproducing, and to her readers. First, in terms of her personal role, Michaels (1992: 99) fulfils in her writing a lesson she learned from her mother, that is, the value of a combination of ‘action and words’ as a form of social aid. Thus, for her, ‘writing is one kind of giving’ (Michaels 1992: 99), or as we have seen James (1937: 347) expressing the function of writing in Chapter 3:³⁹ ‘To “put” things is ... to do them’. The aspect of social awareness infused in Michaels’s writing stems from her engagement with what she calls ‘the dilemma of the witness’, who questions ‘Who am I to say?’ as well as ‘Who am I, if I don’t say[?]’ (Michaels 1992: 99).

³⁹ See Chapter 3, page 149.

Second, in terms of the material, as we have seen in Chapter 2⁴⁰ Michaels refuses to be seen as having written about the Holocaust in *Fugitive Pieces* purely out of personal interest. The personal element plays a significant role, but it is facilitative rather than dominant – it leads Michaels to address the issues that affect more lives than just her own life. For ‘the more deeply you examine your own life, the more deeply you enter your times, and from there, history’, Michaels (1992: 99) suggests. The Second World War was directly ‘a formative event’ for anyone of her generation – ‘when we were born, everyone had just come back from the war, or lost someone in the war, or emigrated because of the war’ – but she feels, too, that the events were of such magnitude that, even indirectly, they pertain to everyone: ‘We should *all* be interested’ in them, ‘no matter where we come from, or who our parents are’ (Michaels, in Crown 2009).

Third, in terms of her audience, as a result of the success of *Fugitive Pieces* Michaels (in Crown 2009) was ‘suddenly confronted with [the] idea of a readership’, and the fact of the readership being both ‘an amazing gift’ and ‘a huge responsibility’. Now, she does not want ‘to disappoint those readers who’ve trusted [her]’ (Michaels, in Crown 2009).⁴¹ With her second published novel *The Winter Vault*, Michaels (in Crown 2009) intends to offer her readers ‘a place for their own concerns’, to ‘make a safe place to talk about things that aren’t safe’. And all her published work⁴² has ‘an unassailable argument for hope’ (Michaels, in Crown 2009).⁴³

We have established in Chapter 2 that because ‘What the Light Teaches’ is not narrated in the voice of a deceased person, it cannot be a corpse poem. But like all other poems, this one does reach us in the ‘disembodied voice’ (Fuss) of the narrator, whose identity and roles in life we can only surmise. While most of the poem appears to achieve the emotional distance advocated by Fuss (2003), the following verse seems temporarily to bring the poem more in line with the raw emotional quality of Celan’s ‘Death Fugue’:

Remembering, we learn to forget.
The kind of forgetting that stops us, one foot
in the spring soil of your farm,
the other in mud where bits of bone and teeth
are still suspended, a white alphabet.
The kind of forgetting that changes
moonlight on the river into shreds of skin.
The forgetting that is the heart’s
filthy drain,
so fear won’t overflow its deep basin. (What the Light Teaches 120)

A personal tone infuses the poem in general, but in this verse in particular the tone of the narrator’s words seems to stem from her own life and family history rather than being intended as expressions of ‘social outrage’ (Fuss 2003: 26). As we have seen above, Celan had little or no ‘emotional buffer’ (Fuss). Michaels’s narrator, too, appears if not utterly bereft then at least *less* ‘at a secure remove from the emotional maelstrom of personal bereavement’ than Fuss (2003) believes is necessary for genuine corpse poetic writing.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 2, pages 85–6.

⁴¹ Her dedication was evident in her practical writing practice. She wrote *The Winter Vault* in the early hours of each morning, ‘from 1am to 5am’, when her two small children were ‘asleep’ and ‘safe’, and she could ‘disengage [the maternal] part of [her] brain’, and ‘be fully present’ in the writing (Michaels, in Crown 2009).

⁴² In the more than 12 years she took to write *The Winter Vault*, Michaels (in Crown 2009) also wrote several shorter books, which she still intends to publish, and five children’s books.

⁴³ Most likely, remembrance features so powerfully in Michaels’s work because, as Israeli poet Yehudi Amichai (in Michaels 1994: 15) suggests, “‘to remember is a kind of hope’”. Moreover, ‘when memory evokes consideration of what might have been or been prevented, memory becomes redemptive’ (Michaels 1994: 15).

We can also notice in this verse that though Michaels's narrator's emotions are slightly more tempered than Celan's (and his narrator(s)), they are powerful nevertheless. Fear *is* powerful, and for the narrator it is the primary negative emotional event of the poem. In the years immediately following the loss of his family, Jakob cannot conceive of any stronger emotion (*FP* 19), and while they did not experience the war themselves, the narrator and her sister are affected by it, because 'everywhere the past juts into the present' with the force of 'mountains burst[ing] from one era into another,/ or crumpl[ing] up millennia, time joining at its ends' (*What the Light Teaches* 120), as we learn from the verse preceding the one that has been quoted above. The narrator and her sister likewise 'pleat time' (*What the Light Teaches* 120); figuratively, they simultaneously inhabit the past and the present, just as Celan does. And like Celan, it is their preoccupation with the chilling details of the past, of the sufferings of Holocaust victims both known and foreign to them, that grips them in the inappropriate kind of remembrance.

It perhaps bears repeating here that in *Fugitive Pieces* we learn how, for many years, Jakob is also thus afflicted. In his desire to make up for at first not noticing Bella's absence he resolves never to forget her, but this is the inappropriate kind of remembrance. His acute sense of her presence, his near obsession in finding out what happened to her and his projections of himself into her concentration camp experiences, themselves creations of his imagination – all of this keeps him too close to her, too sympathetic towards her, as he thereby obscures the distinction between himself and her. The narrator and her sister in 'What the Light Teaches' are, in the above-quoted verse and in one or two other instances, too close to the Jewish dead in the same way – they too are more sympathetic towards the dead than empathic, which makes them also a little closer to Celan than to Michaels at this moment.

By now the mass graves of the Holocaust are well documented – long afterwards the earth continues to reveal the durable bodily elements, the bones and teeth of the Nazis' victims. The narrator portrays herself and her sister as standing with one foot in the present, in the farm's 'spring soil', and one foot in the past, in the bone- and teeth-revealing 'mud' (*What the Light Teaches* 120). Equally familiar to some of us may be the idea of certain Nazi doctors, almost too macabre to comprehend, of using human skin in the form, among others, of lampshades. The narrator also sees the present change into the past, the reflection of the 'moonlight' broken by the rippled surface of 'the river' appears as 'shreds of skin' (*What the Light Teaches* 120). Thus the narrator dovetails historical facts with her and her sister's own, post-war lives, just as Celan dovetails the camp experience with his own, post-war life. Michaels and Celan's authorial processes here are mirror images: Michaels's narrator brings the past forward into their present; Celan takes himself back into the (for him) recent past.

Their proximity with the dead frightens the narrator and her sister just as it terrified Jakob. This proximity embodies the kind of remembrance that actually makes them 'forget' (*What the Light Teaches* 120), or fail to bear in mind, the true nature of the dead, which is their difference, being deceased, from the living and their desire, as Fuss (2003: 25) helps us to understand, to remain dead, not to be made to live again. The heart is portrayed in the above-quoted verse as having 'a deep basin', and thus as being capable of feeling (containing) a great deal of emotion. But even a deep container has a rim, over which whatever the basin holds can eventually flow – in other words, even a heart has a limit beyond which whatever emotion it is feeling (containing) can flow. If we push the metaphor slightly further, we can see the heart as filled to bursting, and a burst heart in turn signifies 'death', an end to itself. In order that this does not happen, in order for the narrator and her sister's hearts not to burst with fear and anguished recollections, their hearts have devised a 'drain', made 'filthy' by the fear that flows through it, and this drain is precisely the 'forgetting' (all from *What the Light Teaches* 120), the inappropriate kind of

remembering, that they and Jakob in *Fugitive Pieces* are practising at these specific stages of the poem and the novel.

In contrast to humans, the earth does not judge – it does not ‘care’ whether the corpses it receives had been good or bad people, moral or criminal, able to remember appropriately or inappropriately. It is the ‘naturally existing external world’, which is ‘wholly ignorant’ of our “‘hurtability’”, in Scarry’s (1985: 288) terms. Michaels personifies it nevertheless, “‘making it’ as knowledgeable about human pain as if it were itself animate and in pain’ (Scarry 1985: 289): The earth ‘mourns’ the ‘contortions of disorder’ (What the Light Teaches 119) that it has undergone over millennia,⁴⁴ vast physical shifts that are mirrored by the literally smaller, in implication and consequence just as vast, ethical and social upheavals that have occurred during the 20th century. The expansive image we receive in the lines ‘Continents torn in half and turned into coastlines,/ call for themselves across the sea’ (What the Light Teaches 119) is echoed in comparative minutia in the lines that portray Germany summoning Doebelin in ‘Sublimation’ (70), for example, though he had torn himself from her, his homeland: ‘the church bells in Heidelberg ... calling [him] back to the place’.

We humans mourn the atrocities of the Holocaust just as the earth mourns its ‘flux’ (What the Light Teaches 119). We are confused by our fellow man’s murderous and oppressive actions, as the earth is confused ‘in its upheavals and depressions’, and just as our hearts are capacitive, so the earth ‘has room in its heart’ for us when we are dead (What the Light Teaches 120). It stores us; and because it is a living thing in which cells procreate, develop and die, it ‘replaces us’, ‘carefully, part by part’ (What the Light Teaches 120). Characteristically slow-moving itself, it allows us time to de-compose: ‘Gently, so [our] bones may embrace a little longer,/ [the earth’s] mud replaces [our] marrow’ (What the Light Teaches 120). This is the most literal instance of the visceral ‘events’ that we can find in the poem; it is an earthly element of the lesson learned by the narrator.

While it seems, then, as we have seen in Chapter 2,⁴⁵ that Michaels’s living-poems are something like, but something other than corpse poems, Michaels would understand a primary impulse that drives corpse poetry, as Celan could have also. The title of Roy Fuller’s poem ‘Ghost Voice’⁴⁶ is ‘an especially apt title for describing the spectral utterances of any corpse poem’, observes Fuss (2003: 23). The narrators of ‘Death Fugue’ are ghosts – much as Celan takes himself back into the recent past, making it the poem’s present at the time of writing, and takes his readers there with each reading, the narrators voices are ethereal, utterly separate from their once ‘living, breathing bod[ies]’ (Fuss), and they were so even when Celan first conceived their words.

‘Ghosts enter the world’ through language, we learn from ‘What the Light Teaches’ (121). With his ever-troubled and -troubling German, and by joining them, Celan takes the existing world back to the deceased Jews. The as yet blank page on which Celan will soon write ‘Death Fugue’ is ‘the white field’, perhaps, in which he invites the dead to ‘gather’ (What the Light Teaches 121). In order to do so, the narrator of ‘What the Light Teaches’ (121) elaborates, they must ‘twist into awkward positions/ to squeeze through the black spaces’, which in *Fugitive Pieces* (95)

⁴⁴ Humans cannot see or watch the earth’s movements taking place. In a single moment, in a day or even over a few years, we see those movements as ‘frozen acrobatics of folding and faults’ (What the Light Teaches 119). Geographical history has taught us, as Michaels (1992: 96) herself knows, that this apparently ‘static surface is an illusion’, which ‘actually reveals all the earth forces that forged and continue to forge the present geological moment’.

⁴⁵ See Chapter 2, pages 102–10.

⁴⁶ Roy Fuller (1912–1991), British poet and novelist ‘best known for his concise and observant verse chronicling the daily routines of home and office’ (EB 2008). ‘Ghost Voice’ comes from his volume *New and Collected Poems 1934–84*.

serve to separate things ‘from their names’. From the page, from the field, the ghosts ‘look up’ at Celan, ‘waiting for [him]/ to write their names’ (What the Light Teaches 121–2). However, in ‘Death Fugue’ Celan names them only with the first person plural pronoun, ‘we’, and not with their actual names; he focuses on the camp experiences, not on the (hopefully happier) lives of the prisoners before the war. Thus, in Michaels’s terms, he fails to remember them appropriately; he never manages to transform them from ghosts into spirits.

Among all of Michaels’s poems, six narrators are concerned in varying degrees with language. Doebelin, in ‘Sublimation’, laments the loss of his mother tongue, the language he uses to write his novels, while he lives outside of Germany. Blixen presents language as a bridge between herself and Finch Hatton in ‘Blue Vigour’. Marie Curie used a private journal, which presumably supported Michaels’s composition of ‘The Second Search’, to witness her bereavement. ‘Ice House’ shows us how Scott treasures her husband’s Antarctic journals.

The narrator of ‘Words for the Body’ searches for the ‘perfect word’ as her close friend searches for ‘perfect sound’ (Words for the Body 44, 43). After ‘twenty-five years’ of their separate but similar endeavours, ‘every love poem/ says how [the friend’s] music and [the narrator’s] words are the same: praising ... memory’ (Words for the Body 46). In ‘The Hooded Hawk’ (172) the narrator talks about the manuscript that Wiseman wrote and ‘pushed ... across the table’ to her ‘without comment’. ‘Abandoned’ for some time, the ‘pages’ (The Hooded Hawk 172) constituted the autobiographical novel that was published in real life. Thus in ‘Words for the Body’ and ‘The Hooded Hawk’ we find language upholding and performing the memorialising function of words, respectively, that Michaels endorses, as we see below. However, none of these six people have lost so much of the contents of their lives, both material and emotional, that language is the only thing that remains in their possession.

‘What the Light Teaches’ – real-life subjects

In the preceding discussions we have investigated whether Michaels’s metaphor of language as a home, introduced to us in ‘What the Light Teaches’, also features in *Fugitive Pieces* and her other poems. By finding that it does not do so, I do not intend to imply that Michaels is being inconsistent. Rather, she applies the metaphor in a specific context, which differs from the contexts of her other works. In ‘What the Light Teaches’, as we know, the narrator interweaves memories of her relationship with her sister and parents with references to real people who had been robbed by their oppressors of almost everything they owned and cared for – people such as certain nameless Holocaust victims and the Russian poets Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam and Akhmatova.⁴⁷ This is the reason, moreover, for ‘The Weight of Oranges’ possibly being the single exception to the above-stated ‘rule’ of all of Michaels’s poems failing to utilise the language-as-a-home metaphor. Mandelstam admits in this poem that his language, his subversive poetry, is the cause of his exile and separation from his wife. And ironically, it seems to be the only thing that remains in his possession at this last stage of his life – as the epigraph of the poem indicates, his ‘life’ is ‘far away’ (The Weight of Oranges 34).⁴⁸ He inhabits language, or

⁴⁷ By focusing on these real-life people, Michaels thereby combines, in this poem, the historically oppressive backgrounds of ‘The Weight of Oranges’ and ‘Sublimation’.

⁴⁸ The complete epigraph reads as follows:
Now I lodge in the cabbage patches
of the important ...
Not much sleep under strange roofs
with my life far away ...
Osip Mandelstam

language houses him, as he writes the letter he ‘always write[s]’ (The Weight of Oranges 37) to Nadezhda while in exile.

Along with Mandelstam and Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva (1892–1941) is considered to be among the leading 20th-century poets in the Russian language. Her work is known for its ‘staccato rhythms, originality, and directness’ (*EB* 2008), as well as for the ‘extraordinary precision and technical skill’ with which she executed it (Bayley 1984: 156). She seems to resemble Celan, slightly, in that she too played with the structure of words – ‘cutting prefixes, changing endings and one or two vowels’ – in a search just as much for their truth as for the ‘essence and authenticity of emotions’ (Slonim 1972: 124). Moreover, like Celan, this aspect of her poetry was misunderstood by her contemporary audience – her “‘game of phonemes” irritated [her] many detractors among émigré critics[,] who contended that her manner had degenerated into mannerism, linguistic tricks, and metric acrobatics’ – and like Celan she refused to consent to the judgement (Slonim 1972: 124; see also Stock 2001: 763).

Growing up mainly in Moscow, Tsvetaeva was well travelled and studied at the Sorbonne. As her husband, Sergei Efron, was a member of the White army that countered the Russian Revolution of 1917, many of her poems at that time praised the anti-Bolshevik resistance (*EB* 2008). Mandelstam was in love with her, too, and unsuccessfully pursued her for some time (Bayley 1984). Leaving the Soviet Union in 1922, and living briefly in Berlin and Prague, in 1925 she settled in Paris, where she published several volumes of poetry, some essays on the creative process and some literary criticism. In her last cycle of poems, ‘Verses to the Czech Land’ (1938–9), she reacts intensely to the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia.

However, she was not well received by the émigrés in Paris, who seemed to perceive a stubbornly revolutionary element in her poetry: ‘In the emigration they began (enthusiastically!) publishing [her], then, on reflection, they withdrew [her] from circulation, sensing [that her poetry] was not in-[their]-line but from-over-there’ (Tsvetaeva, in Bayley 1984: 159). In the 1930s Tsvetaeva’s poems demonstrated her increasing homesickness and disaffection with her immigrant life. At this time her husband had begun to absorb communist ideals, and he returned to the Soviet Union with their daughter. There he was linked with the murder of the son of Leon Trotsky,⁴⁹ and was arrested and shot during the purges (Bayley 1984). The daughter was sent into the Gulag. Tsvetaeva and her son followed them in 1939; they settled in Moscow, where she made a meagre living translating poems. They were evacuated during the Second World War to Yelabuga (or Elabuga) (see below), where they were without social and financial support. She committed suicide there in 1941 (en.wikipedia ... Yelabuga).

With her husband, Nicholas Gumilev, and Mandelstam, Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) founded the Acmeist school of poetry, which upheld ‘beautiful clarity’, according to the anti-Symbolist Russian poet Mikhail Kuzmin (in *EB* 2008), who was also a member. To the Acmeists’ demand for ‘concrete representation’, ‘precise form and meaning’ and ‘a broad-ranging erudition’, Akhmatova contributed ‘elegant colloquialism’ and ‘sophistication’ (*EB* 2008), as well as ‘elemental force’ and ‘haunted’ utterance (Bayley 1984: 138). She and her husband had a son, Lev, but did not remain married. Initially, her principle theme was frustrated and tragic love. Her early work quickly became famous, her generation taking her poetic voice as representative of their experience (*EB* 2008). During the First World War and Russian Revolution of 1917 she added some ‘civic, patriotic, and religious motifs’ (*EB* 2008) to her work, and became technically more proficient.

⁴⁹ Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), communist theorist and agitator, and leader in the Russian Revolution of 1917. He lost the power struggle that attended Lenin’s death to Stalin, and was exiled and then assassinated in Mexico.

However, the communists claimed that Akhmatova's work was "bourgeois", "aristocratic" and overly focused on 'love and God' (EB 2008). Her position was further threatened by Gumilev's 1921 execution, allegedly for participating in an anti-Soviet plot. In the 1920s she fell poetically silent. Mandelstam's 'dearest friend' (Shirazi 2003: 199), she was present when he was arrested in 1934, and in 1936 she wrote a poem to him in his subsequent Voronezh exile (see further below), where,

in the room of the banished poet
Fear and the Muse stand watch by turn,
and the night is coming on,
which has no hope of dawn. (Akhmatova 1997: 87)

Akhmatova's son and her third husband, Nicholas Punin, were arrested in 1935 for political subversion. Though they were both released soon after, Lev was arrested again in 1938 and spent five years in the Gulag. Rather unexpectedly, some of Akhmatova's current and earlier poems were published in 1940 in a monthly literary journal, but as with Tsvetaeva, they were then withdrawn from sale and distribution (EB 2008). During the Second World War Akhmatova was evacuated from her home, Leningrad, to Tashkent, in Uzbekistan, where she was able to read her poetry to wounded soldiers and published several war poems. She returned to Leningrad at the end of the war and her poems began to appear in local magazines and newspapers.

Akhmatova's popularity 'became an embarrassment to the authorities' (Bayley 1984: 142), however: She was indicted in 1946 for political indifference, among other things, and her poetry was seen as "alien to the Soviet people" (EB 2008). Her work was put out of print for three years, and she was subjected to 'increasing degrees of persecution, including constant escort by the secret police' (Bayley 1984: 142). Lev was arrested again in 1949, and this time exiled to Siberia. Logically, the tone of the elegies she wrote about Stalin at this time in an effort to regain her son's freedom was quite different to the 'Requiem' (1935–40), the 'moving and universalized lyrical cycle' (EB 2008) that she had written in reaction both to Lev's earlier Gulag imprisonment and to the sufferings of the people under Stalin's rule.

'Requiem' is the work that Michaels (1992: 99) cites as an example of a poet speaking *from* 'her place' within 'her tribe', rather than *for* her tribe – in this poem, Akhmatova is saying: 'This is what I see'.⁵⁰ During the Yezhov⁵¹ purges, Akhmatova spent 17 months waiting in long and freezing prison lines to find out more about her son's fate (Akhmatova 1997: 99; Bayley 1984: 141). On one occasion, a woman nearby whispered to her: 'Can you describe this?', to which she responded that she could (Akhmatova 1997: 99). 'A hundred million people shout' through '[her] tortured mouth' (Requiem, in Akhmatova 1997: 115). Such identification with 'fellow-spirit[s] in suffering' is perhaps partly the result of her poems frequently featuring the idea of a mirror image (Bayley 1984: 139). As a friend of hers confirms: 'Whatever has happened to her or in her proximity – great or petty – she always senses through her cares [for] the country and the world' (Lydia Chukovskaya, in Gifford 1989: 128).

Akhmatova was slowly and partially rehabilitated following Stalin's death (Bayley 1984: 142; EB 2008). In the 1960s she was awarded a prestigious literary prize and an honorary doctoral degree, and her work was widely translated and published, without the Stalin elegies at her specific

⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Henry Gifford (1989: 138) believes that with this poem Akhmatova 'unmistakably assumed the role of a national poet'.

⁵¹ Nikolay Ivanovich Yezhov (1895–some time after January 1939), Russian Communist Party official who, while chief of the Soviet security police (NKVD) from 1936 to 1938, administered the most severe stage of the great purges, known as *Yezhovshchina* (EB 2008).

request (poets.org). Exemplifying Michaels's notion that we are saved by what we save (*What the Light Teaches* 121), Akhmatova 'survived through her poetry' (Gifford 1989: 128). She died in Leningrad. During her life, Akhmatova also wrote, among several other non-fiction texts and translations, 'sensitive personal memoirs' (*EB* 2008) on Modigliani, with whom she is said to have had an affair when both were in their 20s (see further below), and on Mandelstam.

Osip Mandelstam (1891–presumably 1938) infused his poetry with drops of 'friendship and literature, history and idea'; his 'configuration of intimacy with other poets from Pushkin to Akhmatova' is 'dense', 'homely' and 'direct' (Bayley 1984: 150). As in the work of Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova, his poetry demonstrates 'excellent craftsmanship' (Strakhovsky 1947: 62). And he, too, suffered censorship and oppression. In the few years between his two exiles, for instance, his work was rejected by Soviet publishers (Struve 1971: 19). Indeed, his wife saw him as 'a foreign body' – a "nomad" – in Soviet literature from its beginning (Struve 1971: 21). While he was in Voronezh (see further below), his name could no longer be printed in the papers even in denouncement (Shirazi 2003: 208).

According to Sidney Monas (1975: 522), Acmeism was a social as well as a literary movement in Russia – 'it brought a reinvigorated moral force back into Russian poetry'. We may therefore assume that Mandelstam's poetry contained at least a degree of morality. And Tsvetaeva and Akhmatova were both moral people. Tsvetaeva's poetry was controlled by her 'strong moral convictions'; her 'passions, hatred of injustice, anarchy and corruption, [and] profound admiration for duty, honour, loyalty, and trust' infused her creations as much as they guided her behaviour (Bayley 1984: 157). Akhmatova's deeply religious stance was implied by the significant role that conscience played in her work (Bayley 1984). She was sure that Leningrad was 'her place':

I cannot be parted from you,
My shadow is on your walls,
My reflection in the canals (Poem Without a Hero, in Gifford 1989: 135)

And this certainty 'served as a moral anchor' for her (Gifford 1989: 135). Demonstrably a moral writer,⁵² Michaels does not surprise us in presenting these morally guided poets as subject matter and as transmitters of her view on the significance of memory in the process of the appropriate form of remembrance, as we see in the following section.

'What the Light Teaches' – a close reading

Light and water are crucial images in 'What the Light Teaches'.⁵³ The river on the sister's farm, like language, as we see shortly, is a repository of memory, and the river, rain and light are vehicles for memory-making and conveyors of negative and positive aspects of historical and personal life. The title of the poem not only alerts us to the idea that light can be instructive, it also suggests, by commencing with the pronoun 'what', that the poem contains the lesson that the light is capable of teaching the narrator and us. We determine the meaning of the lesson in the following close reading, in which we explore these images and their implications, the references to the Russian poets and many pivotal verses and lines.

We are introduced to the images of water and light, and the attendant pointer to memory, in the first two (short) verses of the poem. Their deeper significance becomes known as the discussion ensues. We can make an initial assessment here, and return to the verses a little later. The river

⁵² See Chapter 3, pages 150–61.

⁵³ A transcript of the poem is provided in Appendix 2.

traversing the sister's farm appears in the poem's opening line. 'Countless times [it] has been bruised' (What the Light Teaches 117) by the narrator and her sister's bodies, indicating at the superficial level that as girls and now as women the pair have enjoyed frequent swims in the river. But the narrator also presents their bodies, in the second line, in the much more complex image of 'liquid fossils of light' (What the Light Teaches 117). The term *fossils* suggests something ancient but also preserved; the word *liquid* could be used here to match the form taken by the bodies with the form of the body of water through which they move; and the word *light* could be the first hint of the lesson of the light that the narrator and we learn from the poem as a whole.

The narrator and her sister 'shed [their] ghost skins in the current' in the second verse and 'climb the bank, heavy and human' (FP 117). In the river, the women's bodies are buoyant and insubstantial, as are ghosts. On land, their bodies are subject to the force of gravity and thus they must accept the solid reality of their human forms; they cannot pretend, as they may have done while in the water, that they can change shape or form. The river, being part of the sister's farm, is one of the locations that will serve as a meeting place for the pair 'when there are no places left for [them]' (What the Light Teaches 117) – in other words, when they have died.⁵⁴ There, they will listen to their river 'humming between closed lips' as attentively as Tsvetaeva, the sister's 'favourite poet', 'who listened with the roots of her hair' (What the Light Teaches 118).⁵⁵ It seems that water, as well as light, has advice to impart.

The narrator and her sister are troubled by their father's trouble. Here again the narrator's main emotion is fear. Sometimes she is 'afraid to touch him', fearing that her 'hand would go right through him' (What the Light Teaches 119) as it would go right through a ghost, who is also a (deceased) person for whom 'memory' would be 'only skin' (What the Light Teaches 124), nothing below or behind the surface, if he and his life would remain unnamed after his death. But he is not dead. 'He is alive' and conscious, and he feels, living as he does 'in a history made more painful by love' and being beset by recollections he would perhaps rather not entertain (What the Light Teaches 119). As the narrator of 'The Hooded Hawk' (169) sees it, 'history is the love that enters us/ through death; its discipline is grief'.⁵⁶ The *history* in which the father lives is most likely that of the Second World War, and his *love* for his family is presumably threatened by the fact of such events having happened and by the possibility of their repeated occurrence. Growing up in this context, the narrator and her sister 'float in death' (What the Light Teaches 119). Michaels thereby suggests that the image of water can carry or convey the image of history that is metonymically presented as death. She also provides, here, the first hint of a remedy, conveyed in the images of light and water:

the ordinary world holds together
like the surface tension of water,
still and stretched, a splash of light. (What the Light Teaches 119)

The world, in and of itself – not that of history, but instead *ordinary* in existing in the present time and being engaged with the mundane details of life – holds a key to dealing with the deathful past. We return to this point shortly.

⁵⁴ See also Chapter 3, page 137.

⁵⁵ 'The Russianness of Tsvetaeva's poetry and prose ... consists in an obvious authenticity of the emotions. Everything is felt instantly and strongly; everything is ... terrible and joyful' (Bayley 1984: 156). In one of her memoirs, Nadezhda Mandelstam (in Bayley 1984: 158) writes of Tsvetaeva that 'she could never have reined herself in, as Akhmatova did', that 'what she always needed was to experience every emotion to the utmost'.

⁵⁶ Moreover, as the narrator explains, in dreams the hooded hawk symbolises 'sometimes/ love, sometimes death' (The Hooded Hawk 172).

Then comes the verse about the heart's 'filthy drain' (What the Light Teaches 120), which is the inappropriate kind of forgetting that we have explored above with reference to Celan. In this state of mind, immersed as they are in *death*, the women are unable to avoid sensing the presence of the Jewish and familial 'cousins', whom we first met in the poem 'Lake of Two Rivers'. 'They're here' in 'strange darkness', yet

light gushes over rocks
and the sun drips sweet fat the colour of peaches
over fields. ... (What the Light Teaches 120–1)

Light takes on the same macabre aspect as the *bits of bone, teeth* and *shreds of skin* in the earlier verse. Light *gushes* as blood gushes from a wound, by implication perhaps the penetrative wounds inflicted on the Jews by the Germans; the sun *drips ... fat* as the crematoria of the camps could have dripped with the melting tissue of its burning victims. In this way, Michaels emphasises the negative quality of the aforementioned forgetting, and continues to do so by locating this scene at the farm's river and presenting water as conveying a chilling message. It is the river whose 'noise' masks the sound of 'a mother giv[ing] birth in a sewer' and 'soldiers push[ing] sand down a boy's throat' (What the Light Teaches 121). These are sounds in the form of voices that the narrator and her sister 'hear' by being aware of such happenings during the Holocaust, but 'can't hear' perhaps because when these things did happen the new mother, the boy and the soldiers most likely did them as quietly as possible so as not to be discovered (What the Light Teaches 121). Similarly, the narrator and her sister *can't bear* the silence of the

parents rounded up in a town square,
who stopped their tongues in time,
saving children by not
calling out to them in the street (What the Light Teaches 121)

and thus shielding them from the German soldiers' attention.

Michaels proposes an antidote to the inappropriate kind of forgetting, which is the appropriate kind of remembrance, in preserving the memory of the pre-war past. Because the narrator and her sister are their 'father's daughters', possibly Jewish too, they 'try to withstand memory/ with memory ... [of] before' (What the Light Teaches 121). They try, in other words, to withstand the memory of the places where Jews suffered intensely – the sewer, the site of the choking, the town square (all from What the Light Teaches 121) – with the aid of memory of the places of the earlier past, where Jews, perhaps like their parents and grandparents, were happier and safer, that is, the 'dacha in the high forests of Kochtobel',⁵⁷ the banks of the Moyka River in Petersburg, and the 'wooden sidewalks of Kiev' (What the Light Teaches 121).

We have seen above how, during their practise of the inappropriate kind of forgetting, the sisters bring the past into the present, conflating the cousins' presence with their own presence on the farm (What the Light Teaches 120). But as Michaels (1992: 97) points out, the 'present moment is *not ... a gate to the past*', or as in Celan's case the present moment is not a bridge to the past. We should not simply allow the past to become part of the present. Rather, Michaels (1992: 97) explains, the present 'takes its [rightful] place in a significant, mysterious narrative'. The appropriate kind of remembrance entails returning to the past, to the time before the events that

⁵⁷ Kochtobel, or Koktebel, is a small resort town in the southeastern Crimea, in the Ukraine (en.wikipedia ... Koktebel). Russian poet Maximilian Voloshin (1877–1932) lived in Kochtobel and entertained guests such as Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam and Symbolist theorist and poet Andrey Bely (the pseudonym of Boris Nikolayevich Bugayev (1880–1934)), who 'all wrote remarkable poems' there (en.wikipedia ... Koktebel). Tsvetaeva also met her husband there (Bayley 1984).

caused the injury and/or death that necessitated remembrance, and gathering memories and meanings from it there; furthermore, it involves keeping the past where it should be, in the past, bringing the gathered memories and meanings with us into the present and using them to devise new meanings, which will be of benefit in the future. Michaels's (1992: 97) summary of the process – 'Reaching back, like looking at stars, the poem is illumined by forward light' – is confirmed by the narrator of 'Miner's Pond' (56): 'At Miner's Pond we use the past/ to pull ourselves forward'.

The sister also takes herself and the narrator back using language that predates the war by many years; she 'read[s] poems in the old language/ [that] [their] parents can't speak' but that sounds as 'natural' (all from *What the Light Teaches* 121) in her mouth as if it were spoken by their ancestors. In this way, 'language' also 'remembers' (*What the Light Teaches* 122); in more literal terms, language also serves as a repository of memory.

Michaels's faith in the benefit of naming, with which we have become familiar in Chapter 3, also comes into focus here as the narrator presents the verse about ghosts 'gather[ing] in the white field .../ waiting' (*What the Light Teaches* 121–2) for their names to be written. The narrator is perhaps referring not only to the ghosts of the cousins, but also to the ghosts that she and her sister will become when they have died, who will wait to be named as well. Above we have seen, and shortly below we see, how the pair learn to practise the appropriate form of remembrance – of their ancestors, their grandparents and parents, and of their own lives. The naming process seems to imply that their children and other relatives of the next generation should also learn to overlay memories of the distant and recent past, both familial and historical, in order to remember *them*, and themselves, appropriately.

Here the deeper meanings of the poem's first two verses become clearer. In their potentiality to be no longer alive and as yet unnamed, the sisters take the form of ghosts when they swim in the river. Their ghostly boundary is *only skin* – skin is the only thing that they (have to) shed upon climbing out of the river. In other words, without being remembered (yet), they are lacking the spirit-forming substance that, as we have learned in Chapter 3,⁵⁸ they can gain through being named and appropriately remembered. However, in water they themselves have the potential to be, as water has the potential to be, a storehouse of memory. Moreover, as their *father's daughters*, they are physical 'records' of him and his life – this is the additional fossil-like characteristic that they have of embodying that which they seek to remember and strive to do appropriately. The image of the sisters as fossils *of light* suggests that their method of remembrance has the capability of being appropriate. But when the living women do stop swimming, when they are no longer immersed in that which holds memory, they must shed their ghostly skins and take on their human form. On land, they are weighty with life and with the potential to remember inappropriately.

Like the river, *language remembers*. Words such as 'number' and 'oven' (*What the Light Teaches* 122), for example, ordinary and indistinct in the pre-war world, come to the fore during the Second World War. When they 'take [their] place/ in [the] history' (*What the Light Teaches* 118) of the Holocaust they are associated with anguish, deprivation and death. The words are euphemisms, like the euphemism 'energy release',⁵⁹ and the Germans commit an immoral act – trying to 'render the immoral, moral' (Michaels 1994: 15) – in using them to conceal the horrific truth of dehumanisation and extermination that they carried out on a vast scale. In retaliation,

⁵⁸ See Chapter 3, page 137.

⁵⁹ See Chapter 2, page 79.

other obscure words can engender ‘new meaning’⁶⁰ (What the Light Teaches 122) – positive, and by implication moral, words like ‘tea’ (What the Light Teaches 122), when it is used to recall the ‘tins of Russian tea .../ lining [the narrator’s sister’s] shelves’ that are so ‘familiar’ to the narrator (What the Light Teaches 118); like ‘dacha’ (What the Light Teaches 122) when it is used to recall the Kochtobel dacha (What the Light Teaches 121); and like ‘river’ (What the Light Teaches 122) when it is used to bring to mind ‘the Moyka [River] in [their] mother’s silvery photo of Petersburg’ (What the Light Teaches 121) and, by extension, the river running through the sister’s farm. In this light, Michaels reveals the capacity of the image of water to convey a positive message.

A domestic scene that the narrator then recalls contains two moments of realisation for her, two events that feature a mixture, typical of Michaels, of the three aspects of human beings – the body, the mind and the heart – mentioned at the start of the present chapter. In the first event, she was ‘stopped’ at the sight of her mother ‘lean[ing] her head on her father’s shoulder –/ familiar, and full of desire’ (What the Light Teaches 122).⁶¹ In other words, at the intellectual level, she was startled into seeing her parents as people in their own right rather than as parents. The trigger of this realisation occurs at the emotional level: The narrator perceived the two people at ease in their mutual love and desire.

The couple were wandering through their garden, ‘look[ing] at a nest .../ inspect[ing] strawberries’ (What the Light Teaches 122). The narrator’s sister was ‘reading by the open door’, and nearby ‘the sound of a lawn mower made everything still’ (What the Light Teaches 122). The tranquillity of the scene was silently disrupted for the narrator by a note of warning, which reintroduces the element of fear and which she relays to us in a series of images: Her mother’s dress was ‘the colour of the moon’ (What the Light Teaches 122), in their garden either she or the ‘night cereus’⁶² was (or both were) ‘death in her white dress’ (What the Light Teaches 123), its scent was ‘alarm[ing]’ (What the Light Teaches 123); the sister’s face was ‘suddenly so like’ (What the Light Teaches 123) their father’s face; the ‘glaze of [the] summer light [that day]/ [was] hardening into crust’ (What the Light Teaches 123). All these signs contribute to the second event that the narrator experienced intellectually, emotionally and viscerally: To the ‘accustomed sadness/ of what [they]’d lost’ must then be added the knowledge of ‘what [they] were losing’ (What the Light Teaches 123). The narrator perhaps realises the fact of her parents’ ageing. This understanding takes the form of a ‘new [emotional] injury’, and as ‘a gash/ bleeding into

⁶⁰ There is a fine distinction to be made here: Michaels’s narrator refers to ‘new *meaning*’ (What the Light Teaches 122, emphasis added), not to ‘new words’. As we learn from Klemperer (2000: 14), the Nazis did not invent a new language, they used the existing German language, in three major ways, in promoting their anti-Semitic policies (see also Chapter 1, page 47). Further on in ‘What the Light Teaches’ (124), the narrator lists ‘new language’ as a positive alternative to the existing oppressive language, but I suggest that here she is not speaking literally; rather, she uses the specific words in the phrase as a contrast to the ‘language of a victim’ that she had identified slightly earlier. In order to be free of oppression, imposed partly in the oppressor’s language, one must use language that is ‘new’ in being free, itself, of the oppressor’s influence.

⁶¹ We cannot be certain that the woman who leans her head on the narrator’s father’s shoulder is indeed the narrator’s mother. While the narrator mentions her father as ‘father’ three times, in praying to ‘the sky .../ to deliver him from memory’, in referring to herself as her ‘father’s daughter’ and in ‘look[ing] out at [him] in the yard’ (What the Light Teaches 119, 121, 122), she specifically mentions her mother only once, in relation to her ‘silvery photo of Petersburg’ (What the Light Teaches 121). The narrator’s use of the word ‘she’ instead of ‘our mother’ in the lines ‘I looked out at our father in the yard and saw/ how she leaned her head on his shoulder’ (What the Light Teaches 122) is slightly surprising in its contrast with the specific mention of the father. However, I choose to assume that the woman being referred to is indeed the narrator’s mother, as I think that if she were someone else, another wife or some other woman loved by the father, Michaels would have made this relationship clearer in the poem.

⁶² The night-blooming cereus, also called the ‘moon cactus’, is ‘any member of a group of about 20 species of cacti ..., ... known for its large, usually fragrant, night-blooming white flowers’ (EB 2008).

everything’ (both from *What the Light Teaches* 123) it also takes the form of a metaphorically visceral event.

The narrator’s response is informed by her awareness of the value of the *ordinary world*, a *splash of light* whose myriad elements hold together, as we have seen above, *like the surface tension of water*. This is part of the lesson of light and water: ‘When there are no places left’ for her and her sister – when they have died – they will ‘still talk in order to make things true’ (*What the Light Teaches* 123). They will describe to each other, overlaying memories with memories, the smallest details of everyday life: the ‘shadow pattern of leaves’ that plays over the sister’s ‘bare legs’ (both from *What the Light Teaches* 119) while she sleeps deeply on the couch, ‘as if [she]’d waited years/ for a place to close [her] eyes’ (*What the Light Teaches* 118); ‘the simple feel of an apple in the hand’, ‘the look of the table after a meal’ (*What the Light Teaches* 123). To this group of examples that the narrator gives for the primarily intellectual process of talking-to-make-true, Michaels adds visceral and emotional aspects. The example of ‘nights of tastes’ is literally visceral, of sleep disturbed by ‘the twister of desire’ is emotional, and of ‘drowning in the shadow of your own body’ (all from *What the Light Teaches* 123) is less literally visceral.

Memory being carried by language and memory as preserving language plays an equally important role in the lives of the Russian poets, for as Michaels (2001: 190) explains, relatives and friends often learned these poets’ ‘complete poems’ by heart so that they ‘would not be lost to censorship, enforced exile, and imprisonment’. Mandelstam’s own memory must have been prodigious, as ‘he composed in the mouth, carrying poems there for weeks or months together’ (Bayley 1984: 149). While he may have been the primary source of his meanings – his wife ‘didn’t always see the hidden meaning, and M never explained it to [her], in case [she] should ever be interrogated’ (Nadezhda Mandelstam, in Coetzee 1991: 81) – he was not the only source of his poetry: Nadezhda also memorised and thus preserved many of his poems (Michaels 2001: 190).

And as it is, these poets’ work took many years to resurface – Russian writers born between the 1920s and 50s were ‘starved of literary memory’, ‘large tracts of Akhmatova, ... Mandelstam, [and] Tsvetaeva’, among others, were ‘forbidden, unprinted, unavailable’ (Wesling 1992: 100). Following her death, Tsvetaeva’s family controlled ‘the publication of her work and the dissemination of information about her life’ – once Tsvetaeva’s daughter had provided ‘selections from Tsvetaeva’s personal archive for the first Soviet edition of her work’, she ‘ordered the archive closed until the year 2000’ (Ciepiela 1996: 432 fn 1). This order seems to have been disobeyed, however, as by 1957 ‘it became known abroad that manuscript copies of her poems were being circulated throughout Russia’, and being memorised by the youth (Slonim 1972: 117). Akhmatova’s ‘Requiem’ was published in Russia only in 1989,⁶³ with her longest, perhaps greatest, work, ‘Poem Without a Hero’ (1940–62) having been published there in 1976. While Donald Wesling (1992: 109) believes that Mandelstam ‘still remains largely unpublished in the Soviet Union’, other sources (see, for example, *EB* 2008) suggest that his work was published again in Russia once Stalin had died.

In brief diversion, as stated above there are two other poems of Michaels’s that demonstrate the significance of memory, namely, ‘Words for the Body’ and ‘The Hooded Hawk’. In the former poem the narrator and her close friend learn from Casals the idea of playing ‘what’s not on the page’ (*Words for the Body* 41). Perhaps she means playing the composer’s intentions, a

⁶³ Bayley (1984: 141) notes that the poem was ‘committed to [Akhmatova’s] memory and to the memories of friends’ during the time she composed it, and that it was first published outside Russia in 1963 ‘without [her] consent’.

suggestion that would be supported by the poem's epigraph, which presents Landowska's⁶⁴ angry retort in an 'argument on interpretation': "You play Bach your way, and I'll play him his way". In the light of this idea, the narrator and her friend decide that 'music is memory,/ the way a word is the memory of its meaning' (Words for the Body 41). Bach's music, for example, 'is memory' in terms of containing all that the composer does not 'say' outright,⁶⁵ of being preserved for posterity by the musicians who come after him and of being re-animated every time one of his pieces is played.

A memory is something that we remember. An event occurs or an experience is had at a point in time, and if we think about it again at a later point in time we remember it – our subsequent thought or interconnected series of thoughts becomes a memory of the original thing. As the narrator sums up later in the poem: 'Any discovery of form is a moment of memory' (Words for the Body 46). Thus in the second line of the above quotation the narrator seems to be claiming that a meaning came into existence at one point in time and, later, a word came into being that had and has that meaning and recalls or reanimates that meaning every time it (the word) is used. The word 'remembers', represents the meaning, continually. In other words, whether something is expressed in music or in language, that thing is repeated and affirmed every time the piece of music is played or the pieces (the words) of language are used. Both mediums of expression – music and language – are to be commended for this capability, because as Michaels (1994: 15) suggests, 'memory, like love, gains strength through restatement, reaffirmation'.⁶⁶

The benefit of memory, of repetition, is confirmed throughout the poem. In one particular example, the narrator's friend explains how 'the fear of forgetting notes disappears' when 'the fingers have a memory of their own' (Words for the Body 43). Prodiges aside, this can happen presumably only when the musician has practised long and hard – repeated the playing again and again – and has thereby become deeply familiar with the piece of music they are playing. Another, more general example occurs in the poem in the form of the narrator enacting the retelling of *ordinary world* (What the Light Teaches 119) happenings in the past, and thereby overlays meaning with new memory, which we learn from the narrator of 'What the Light Teaches' is essential in the appropriate form of remembrance. 'We grew up ... together', the narrator begins, and cements the remembrance by highlighting significant events in her and her friend's lives that they share at the ages of 14, 16, 18 and 20 (Words for the Body 41, 41, 43, 44). Moreover, the narrator encourages her friend to recall their 'fifteen-year-old' (Words for the Body 45) selves in the following manner:

Remember the way we walked each other home –
one block further, one block further –
the way we skated in the ravine,
...
Remember climbing the hill, ...
...
how we'd enter your parents' warm house
...
Remember once, mauve and yellow tulips on the dining room table,

⁶⁴ Wanda Louise Landowska (1879–1959), Polish-born harpsichordist. Up to the beginning of the Second World War, she remained 'the principal exponent of 17th- and 18th-century harpsichord music, particularly that of JS Bach' (EB 2008).

⁶⁵ In 'Sublimation' (all from 67–8), Döblin presents this form of saying-without-saying in the 'overtone' of another composer – Hindemith – that 'connect each bar', the 'sounds [listeners] can't hear' but which form 'harmonics' that 'guide [them] through the music' nevertheless.

⁶⁶ As we learn in *Fugitive Pieces* (40), the Jews of Zakynthos hiding coral-like in the hills, for instance, 'tell their children what they can, a hurriedly packed suitcase of family stories, the names of relatives'.

remember the music when we said
play those colours (Words for the Body 45–6)

In this poem, there is no mention of death; the remembrance is not of a deceased person. It is instead an homage both to the longstanding and close relationship that the narrator and her friend enjoy, and to the value of the body as a vehicle for memory and as that which can itself be remembered.

The narrator of ‘Words for the Body’ has a good memory – her portrayal of her relationship with her friend is evocative and touching. Wiseman’s memory, as presented in ‘The Hooded Hawk’, seems to be equally strong. She ‘never forgot’ (The Hooded Hawk 169) even the things that she did not experience herself. Growing up in Winnipeg, Canada, Wiseman was 11 years old in 1939 when with her father she heard radio reports of the ‘floating ghettos’, the ship full of Jewish refugees that was refused asylum ‘at every port’ (The Hooded Hawk 169, 170). She was ‘with them’, recalling them in her novel, *Old Woman at Play*, while normal (and tough) life went on around her – streetcars carried commuters, ‘sewing machines and wooden steaming blocks/ thudded all night’, while listening to her mother ‘tell of her/ [own] escape across the river’, and while she and the poem’s narrator ‘spoke of/ exiled Walter Benjamin’, ‘devoure[r]’ of books (The Hooded Hawk 170).

‘So much of [her] life/ [was] given to ghosts,’ (The Hooded Hawk 172) the narrator declares. Even while afflicted with cancer herself, Wiseman continued to think of others, the narrator points out: ‘After another stage of illness[,] all the years were with [them]’ (The Hooded Hawk 171). Furthermore, two years after Wiseman’s death, for the narrator

... sorrow magnifies
through the generations, each human’s part
heaped upon the next, [and] in this way [their] griefs
are joined. ... (The Hooded Hawk 172)

The details of the story that make up *Old Woman at Play* were stored in Wiseman’s memory for so long – ‘longer than [the Jews] were stranded/ on that boat, on the verge of war[;] longer than the war’ (The Hooded Hawk 172) – but the book was eventually published. According to Belkin (2008), the novel embodies Wiseman’s ‘attempt to know and integrate her mother’s life – and death’, and functions, as do *Fugitive Pieces* and certain of Michaels’s poems, as ‘a way of offering something valuable for others out of the continuity and the loss that are part of [all] human families’.

We return now to the main discussion. While language, facilitating memory and facilitated by memory, may serve as a beneficial and moral repository for the work of the Russian poets and the texts of Holocaust victims and survivors, Michaels provides further evidence of language as a carrier of immoral meaning in connection with these people as well. By now we are familiar with the implications of Michaels’s idea – presented as an intellectual realisation on the part of the narrator – that a victim’s language reveals only his or her namer or oppressor (What the Light Teaches 124). Michaels suggests certain answers to this dilemma, as we have seen above in relation to Celan and in Chapter 3:⁶⁷ silence, or new language, or recollection and usage of the language that is too old for the oppressors, as well as the narrator’s parents, to have learned (What the Light Teaches 125). We have examined Michaels’s attendant point – another intellectual realisation – about truth causing words to ‘fail’ (What the Light Teaches 125), in other words, some truths being too horrific to be described, at the start of the present chapter.

⁶⁷ See Chapter 3, page 120.

Celan (2003: 50) believes that ‘attention is the natural prayer of the soul’. Michaels would likely agree. For her narrator

prayer is the effort of wresting words
not from silence,
but from the noise of other words. (What the Light Teaches 125)

At the more literal level, the narrator is picturing ‘the double swaying’ of the Jews in ‘prayer’ as they are transported ‘on the trains’ to the camps (What the Light Teaches 125). They had to *wrest* their pleas and their hopes for aid from the noise of *other words*, the mixture of terrified, angry, anguished, outraged, argumentative or resigned words presumably uttered by the other Jewish people around them.⁶⁸ At the more figurative level, poets such as Celan and Michaels *wrest* the attentive and truthful words of their poems from the silence that some survivors, critics and theorists feel should shroud the subject of the Holocaust, from the other words voiced and written by everyone after the war who wished to forget and move on, and from those who, many years later, refuse to address the past events.

Holocaust testimony, as valuable as Russian poetry, could also be lost, we learn in *Fugitive Pieces*’s prologue: ‘Diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts ... were lost’ through being ‘deliberately hidden – buried in back gardens’ and remaining unrecovered after the war. A writer ‘buried his testimony’ in ‘What the Light Teaches’ (all from 126) – ‘trusting that someday earth would speak’, that his words would be uncovered and read – but while they rested in the earth ‘no one knew the power of his incantation’. When buried, and un-exhumed, ‘words are powerless’ (What the Light Teaches 126). Moreover, ‘words are powerless as love’ is powerless and overridden by fear when the narrator, and we, remember inappropriately; when she and we abandon the dead by remaining too close to them. ‘Only by taking us as we are’, the narrator explains in an intellectual-emotional realisation that mirrors Jakob’s realisations about Bella in *Fugitive Pieces*, can ‘words’ and ‘love’ be ‘transforming’ (What the Light Teaches 126). In other words, only when we accept the dead as dead and ourselves as living can our *words* and *love* help us to remember appropriately. Luckily, however, ‘other stories [were] concealed in memory’ already and then revived, and others still were ‘recovered, by circumstance alone’, such as Ben’s chance discovery of Jakob’s notebooks and Michaels’s recovery of the survivor stories of people such as Jakob and Ben’s parents (*FP* prologue).

The narrator and her sister ‘cried together’ over Tsvetaeva’s letters to a friend, perhaps identifying with her sentiment that that friend is “‘the only one [she] had left’” (What the Light Teaches 126). The sharing of tears and understanding engenders a sense of mutual closeness that is linked with and surpassed in intensity only by the closeness that the narrator ‘still feel[s]’ towards her sister at night, ‘even in [their] distant bedrooms’, because she knows her sister is ‘awake too,/ if not this night, then another’ (What the Light Teaches 126).

‘For years’, on trips by car to visit her sister, the narrator has Tsvetaeva’s poems ‘on the seat beside her’ (What the Light Teaches 127). Again, the images of light and water feature here: ‘Spring rain’ heralds these journeys, and blurs the headlights and brake lights of the many cars on the road that the narrator takes – sitting in the ‘slow traffic’, the narrator is guided by the

⁶⁸ Levi (1960) confirms that this is the case. In the packed cattle train to Auschwitz, he realises that there are few men who know how to go to their deaths with dignity ... Few know how to remain silent and to respect the silence of others. Our restless sleep was often interrupted by noisy and futile disputes, by curses, by kicks and blows blindly delivered to ward off some encroaching and inevitable contact. (Levi 1960: 24)

‘caravan of swinging lanterns’ (What the Light Teaches 127) formed by the car lights ahead. The rain has wet the paper wrapped around flowers that the narrator brings to her sister and facilitates memory by causing the ‘hard seeds’ in her ‘heart’ to ‘soften and swell as [she] think[s] of [her sister’s] kitchen’, and of Mandelstam, who claims that proximity to a river is necessary for one’s new home, if one ‘must leave the city’ (What the Light Teaches 127). The kitchen has a ‘stone floor/ like a summerhouse in Peredelkino’ (What the Light Teaches 127), which is the writers’ village near Moscow where the poet Pasternak⁶⁹ is buried (moscow-taxi.com). The rain thus aids the narrator in combining memories of personal and historical elements – the sister’s kitchen, the death-place of a contemporary of Mandelstam, thus Mandelstam himself and his historical emphasis on a river that holds personal significance for the narrator and her sibling as well.

Mandelstam comes to mind earlier in the poem when we read again, as we have done in the Introduction to this doctoral thesis and in Chapter 3,⁷⁰ that ‘poets promised to meet’ in Petersburg to speak “‘the blessed word with no meaning’” (What the Light Teaches 125–6). The narrator’s sister, intentionally or otherwise, has followed Mandelstam’s advice by living ‘near a river’ (What the Light Teaches 127). To this maxim the narrator adds the statement that Mandelstam was ‘exiled to Yelabuga on the Kama’ (What the Light Teaches 127). The location of Mandelstam’s first exile was initially Cherdyn – ‘a small place in a remote northeastern corner of European Russia’ (Struve 1971: 19) – but following a period in hospital and a suicide attempt, he and his wife were given permission to move to the central Russian city of Voronezh (*EB* 2008; Shirazi 2003; Struve 1971). The second time, he seems to have been exiled somewhere near Vladivostok, in southeastern Russia (*EB* 2008; Struve 1971). Yelabuga is a town in the Russian republic of Tartastan, on the right bank of the Kama River (en.wikipedia ... Yelabuga). As we know, it is the location of Tsvetaeva’s suicide, but the only link between that place and Mandelstam seems to be that the town of Perm Velikaya had existed on the bank of the Kama River ‘since the 14th century’ and is now called Cherdyn (*EB* 2008).

The spring rain accompanying the narrator is not a gentle rain, it is a ‘thunderstorm’ that in ‘becom[ing] other thunderstorms’ again interweaves scenes, this time of unrevealed personal significance – the ‘darkness ... above Burnside Drive’, ‘the night on High Street’, and of historical significance – ‘young’ Akhmatova and Modigliani under their ‘black umbrella/ reading Verlaine⁷¹ in the Luxembourg’ (What the Light Teaches 127–8). Akhmatova (Akhmatova & Austin 1989) recorded this scene in a brief memoir about the artist. Sheltered from the ‘warm summer shower’ by Modigliani’s ‘enormous, ancient black umbrella’, the two of them ‘took great joy from knowing the same things’ – such as Verlaine – ‘by heart’ (Akhmatova & Austin 1989: 29).

Even with ‘all the languages they spoke’, ‘their lovemaking was with roses!’ (What the Light Teaches 128), the narrator concludes. The languages they spoke at the time were indeed Russian, Italian and French, as the narrator lists (What the Light Teaches 128), but it seems that they did not both speak all of these languages. In Akhmatova’s (Akhmatova & Austin 1989: 30) memory, Modigliani did not speak Russian – he ‘very much regretted that he could not understand [her] verses’ – and at the time she did not speak Italian, because of which he ‘never recited Dante to [her]’. The source of their rose-accompanied lovemaking is likely to be the ‘mix-up’ that occurred

⁶⁹ According to Akhmatova (in Kembal 1983: 128), Pasternak proposed marriage three times to her, and sources present him as one of the literary contemporaries that did and did not shun Tsvetaeva towards the end of her life (see Bayley 1984, and Wesling 1992 respectively). Bayley (1984: 162) believes that he regretted his ‘less than forthcoming’ treatment of her; if so, he made amends by stating in 1957 that “‘the publication of [Tsvetaeva’s] works would be a great triumph and a great discovery for Russian poetry’” (Pasternak, in Slonim 1972: 117).

⁷⁰ See the Introduction, pages 6–7, and Chapter 3, pages 119–20.

⁷¹ Paul(-Marie) Verlaine (1844–1896), French lyric poet who became a leader of the Symbolists.

between the two (Akhmatova & Austin 1989: 30): Happening to have ‘an armful of red roses’ with her, Akhmatova at first waited for Modigliani to return when on one occasion she went to visit him and found him not at home. The studio doors were locked, but seeing that a window was open, she impulsively threw the flowers through it. At their next meeting, Modigliani seemed convinced that she must have somehow gained entrance, for when he had opened the studio door he saw the flowers lying there ‘as if they had been arranged’ (Akhmatova & Austin 1989: 30).

While Akhmatova does not actually use the words ‘love’ or ‘affair’ or even ‘relationship’ in reference to herself and Modigliani in the memoir, there are a few hints that that is the type of relationship that they had (Akhmatova & Austin 1989: 29–30).⁷² She suggests that ‘one central point’ that neither of them seems to have understood at the time was that ‘what was happening between [them] was for each of [them] a provisioning of [their] lives: his a very short one, [hers] very long’. ‘There was no one like him in the entire universe. The sound of his voice has stayed with [her] forever’. ‘He never told tales about past affairs’. Modigliani painted Akhmatova 16 times and gave the paintings to her; almost all of them were ‘lost ... during the first years of the revolution’, and the remaining one ‘least of all captured the feeling of “[them]”’.

The narrator concludes that the fact that Akhmatova and Modigliani could speak more than just their mother tongues – presumably they communicated mostly in French – does not help them: ‘Language [was] not enough/ for what they had to tell each other’ (What the Light Teaches 128). The emotional intensity implied in these lines is sustained in the subsequent lines, in which the narrator describes the emotional event of the ‘joy’ she feels at ‘driving to one who awaits [her] arrival’ (What the Light Teaches 128). At last the negative emotion of fear that has predominated in the poem up to this point is being replaced by a far more positive emotion – happiness – that also serves as a foretaste of the positive nature of the poem’s imminent conclusion.

The narrator will reach her sister’s porch soaking wet, ‘dripping with [the] new memory’ that the visit to come will create, for the ‘May rain’ that has escorted her is ‘rain that helps one past grow out of another’ (What the Light Teaches 128). Thus, the rain *facilitates* memory-making, in slight contrast to the river, which *holds* memory – like language, ‘the river will remember’ (What the Light Teaches 124). The narrator is absorbing and interpreting the messages of the water, in its carrying forms, and the lesson of the light. She understands that she should combine her and her sister’s knowledge and memories of the lives of the Russian poets and their like with their personal memories, and should overlay these different memories with ever new recollections in order to practise the appropriate kind of remembrance.

This scene is followed by the verse, quoted at the start of the present chapter, that presents the narrator’s intellectual-emotional realisation of language’s capacity to be figured as a home. The image of water is put to one side for the moment (but reappears at the poem’s end), and the image of light comes to the fore. Language is not simply a house in this verse, it is a house ‘with lamplight in its windows’ (What the Light Teaches 128) that those in need can see from some distance away. Here, light carries the positive message of welcome and refuge.

In ‘The Hooded Hawk’ (171), Michaels furthermore suggests that home ‘is in the mouth’ in the form not only of language, but also of food – more importantly, food that has roots, that comes from the homeless or exiled eater’s original home or birthplace. She presents this idea in

⁷² Akhmatova and Modigliani’s relationship, if it did involve love, would have been an ‘affair’. She and Gumilev met Modigliani for the first time in 1910 when they were on honeymoon, and she was still married to Gumilev the following year, when she spent more time with Modigliani alone (Nathanson 2008), that is, the time to which ‘What the Light Teaches’ refers.

reference to the poet Heine,⁷³ whom the narrator of the poem feels had such an understanding about home, language and food. Just as language can be a surrogate meal of *soup* and *bread* (What the Light Teaches 128), home can be found by people like Heine in ‘carp in raisin sauce, lamb/ with horseradish and garlic’, though they may be ‘in Paris, surrounded by *cuisine*’ (The Hooded Hawk 171). Heine moved from Germany to Paris in 1831 in a kind of voluntary exile from his wealthy uncle and benefactor’s society, from which he had been outcast (EB 2008). While his early years in Paris were enjoyable – he soon became well known and praised for his literature, and he mixed in prominent circles – his later years there were troubled in various ways (EB 2008). His socially critical and satirical writings were not well received by the Germans, and at the end of 1835, ‘the Federal German Diet tried to enforce a nationwide ban on all his works. He was surrounded by police spies, and his ... exile became an imposed one’ (EB 2008).⁷⁴

Celan would have failed to share the understanding with Michaels and Heine. His poetry features few references to food, much less in the form of the appreciation of food and of food’s literally and figuratively restorative potential. Moreover, critics do not agree on possible signs of influence of Heine’s poetry on Celan.⁷⁵ Be that as it may, there is an image at the end of Celan’s poem ‘Tabernacle Window’ that appears to overlap with Michaels’s presentation of language as *the house with lamplight in its windows* (What the Light Teaches 128). The narrator of ‘Tabernacle Window’ (217) describes ‘something/ – a breath? a name? –/ [that] moves about over orphaned ground’ and is pelted by ‘the black hail that/ fell there too, at Vitebsk’.⁷⁶ ‘Those who sowed it’, that is, the black hail – presumably the shower of death and destruction hurled by the Nazis – also ‘write it’⁷⁷ away with/ a mimetic anti-tank claw!’ (Tabernacle Window 217). In the early 1960s, as we know, Nazi sympathisers and neo-Nazis were intent on ‘writing away’ the details of the Holocaust while keeping anti-Semitism alive.

The ‘something’ – the moving, searching self described by the narrator – then ‘goes to the ghetto and Eden, .../ ... musters the letters and the mortal-/ immortal soul of letters,/ goes to Aleph and Yod’ (Tabernacle Window 219). In other words, the searching self ‘comes upon the Hebrew alphabet’ (Felstiner 1985: 52), which is also Michaels’s ‘alphabet’ (What the Light Teaches 124) – ‘mortal’ (Tabernacle Window 219) when it is the mere skeleton of the traditionally rich ‘old language’ (What the Light Teaches 124); ‘immortal’ (Tabernacle Window 219) when it is the entire ‘old language’ (What the Light Teaches 124)⁷⁸ that can be traced all the way back, Celan implies, to the story of the Garden of Eden. *Aleph* is ‘the primal unvoiced letter ... which also begins God’s first commandment’, and *Yud* (or *Yod*) is ‘the smallest letter, which begins the

⁷³ Heinrich Heine (1797–1856), German poet whose ‘international literary reputation and influence were established by the *Buch der Lieder* (1827; *The Book of Songs*), frequently set to music’ (EB 2008).

⁷⁴ Thus there are parallels between Heine’s life and those of Mandelstam and Tsvetaeva. By contrast, although Akhmatova was moved around by the authorities within Soviet Russia, she never went into exile, willingly or unwillingly. She was ‘deeply loved and lauded by the Russian people in part because she did not abandon her country during difficult political times’ (poets.org). Moreover, according to Bayley (1984: 144), she was ‘proud’ not only of her ‘refusal to emigrate’ but also of her ‘power to bear witness in the time of terror’. As she states in her poem ‘Requiem’, “not under the vault of a foreign/ sky, .../ I was with my people then” (Akhmatova, in Bayley 1984: 144).

⁷⁵ According to Roditi (1992: 11, see also 19), while Celan’s earlier poetry appears to be influenced by the work of various German writers and poets, it shows ‘no influence of any readings of Heine’ – a ‘curious reticence’. However, other sources suggest that from 1958 to the early 60s, ‘Judaism pervades [Celan’s] poetry: ... [including] an epigraph from ... Heine’s bitter “To Edom”’ (Felstiner 1984: 39; see also Felstiner (1985: 52)). The epigraph presented Heine’s use of the word ‘Edom’ as ‘an easily decipherable code word for Germany’ (Lyon 2006: 137).

⁷⁶ Vitebsk is a city and administrative centre in northeastern Belarus that was destroyed by, among others, the Germans in the Second World War (EB 2008).

⁷⁷ In the two instances of the word ‘it’ in this verse, Celan seems to be referring not to a single thing but rather to the black hail in the first instance and to Vitebsk in the second instance.

⁷⁸ See also Chapter 3, pages 119, 128 and 137.

tetragrammaton [the Hebrew four-consonant name for God] and in German also means “Jew” (Felstiner 1986a: 121).

The searching self ‘stands/ beside’ these words, ‘beside everyone: in you’, and it seems that ‘you’ is

Beth, – that is
the house where the table stands with

the light and the Light. (Tabernacle Window 219)

Beth is the Hebrew word for ‘house’ and ‘the first letter of Genesis’ (Felstiner 1985: 53). ‘Celan’s tact and sparseness [in this poem] preserve for the Sabbath its original, redemptive force’, Felstiner (1985: 53) proposes, furthermore suggesting that with this poem Celan ‘gives a home’ to words of ‘Judaic experience ... whose untranslatability marks them also as unassimilable by the German reader’ (Felstiner 1986a: 121). The *lamplight* in Michaels’s house of language is *visible across fields* (What the Light Teaches 128), welcoming all deprived travellers who approach it, whereas Celan’s double-lit house is specifically Jewish, in terms of both race and religion, referring as it does to Genesis: the first book of the Old Testament, which ‘narrates the primeval history of the world ... and the patriarchal history of the Israelite people’ (EB 2008). Michaels’s poem does not contain religious references; there is no indication, for example, of the house being a church or a temple. Nevertheless, the ‘house’ and ‘light’ references in both poems pertain to language that offers refuge, presenting a metaphorical house or home that bids welcome to those in need.

This is the clearest meaning of the metaphor, behind which lie further meanings. Berger (2001: 450) believes that ‘words’ can hold ‘the totality of human experience’, and to an extent Michaels (1992: 96) seems to believe so too, as she suggests that ‘cloned from the single cell of a present moment’, the poem ‘can seem to contain “everything”’. Language ‘even allows space for the unspeakable’, Berger (2001: 450) elaborates. Going a step further, for Gubar (2003: 181) ‘the Shoah [serves] as a test case for poetry and ... for the imagination as a vehicle for conveying what it means for the incomprehensible to occur’. Michaels may well agree with this view, and with Berger’s (2001: 450, emphasis added) conclusion that language ‘is the only dwelling place that cannot be hostile to man’.

For anyone who can do nothing but speak, *soup*, *bay leaves* and *bread* (What the Light Teaches 128) are words, articulated in language, that serve as their *meal* (What the Light Teaches 128); it is their (substitute) *country*, *home* and *family* (What the Light Teaches 128). Language is thereby ‘*potentially ... complete*’ (Berger 2001: 450). Involved as he was in battles and reconciliations with his mother tongue, Celan seems to have expanded language to near-completeness. However, ultimately, the German language did not house him – his relationship with it was too troubled; it was rather a relationship of coexistence (Steiner 1992: 409). He lived with it, not in it. The same can be said of Jakob, in *Fugitive Pieces*.

And the idea can be repeated in application to the narrator of ‘What the Light Teaches’ and her sister. For the three Russian poets, language was quite possibly *the house to run to* (What the Light Teaches 129).⁷⁹ The women have not been dispossessed as the poets had been, and thus they do not need language to provide quite the same type of refuge. Yet also for them language, and

⁷⁹ It proved to be a house of some substance, for as Nadezhda Mandelstam (in Coetzee 1991: 79) relates in her memoir *Hope Against Hope*, when Akhmatova visited Mandelstam in Voronezh, he told her that ‘poetry is power’ (because if the Soviet communists ‘killed people for poetry, then they must fear and respect it’).

memory, serve as forms of solace. At the end of the poem, the narrator admits to being fearful still, at times. Earlier, she explained that she feels closest to her sister ‘in the hours reserved for nightmares’ (What the Light Teaches 126). At the poem’s end, she describes further ‘nights’ of ‘panic’ in ‘the forest of words’

when I’m afraid we won’t hear each other
over clattering branches, over
both our voices calling. (What the Light Teaches 129)

Typically, this forest is made up of various kinds of ‘trees’ or words. Some are useless by themselves, like James’s (1937: 339) ‘standing terms’ that we have discussed in Chapter 3,⁸⁰ that is, the statements of the general social principles and rules that are necessary but insufficient in producing the kind of empathic, morally responsible writing that Michaels produces and the responses of the same nature that we can learn to provide. Some can be worse than useless: They can be damaging. Thanks to Klemperer (2000) and *Fugitive Pieces*, we see how destructive language can be in the hands of the Nazis, and thanks to Nussbaum (1985) we see how ‘obtuse’ standing terms have the potential to be.

Above, we have learned about the power of fear. Fear is so strong that it confronts the narrator even when she is armed with the knowledge of the ways in which to combat it. Her ‘heart/ listens through the cold stethoscope of fear’ (What the Light Teaches 129). Sometimes the emotion is strong enough to serve as the very instrument with which she perceives the world. In an interesting figurative twist, Michaels represents fear as a *stethoscope* that does not transmit messages of the state of being from a patient’s heart to an attentive doctor, as would occur in conventional medical practice, but as transmitting messages of a lack of wellbeing from the world to the narrator’s heart and thence to her whole person. Her unease is located climatically and again in a two-fold image of water and light that supports the negative quality of the emotion: She is frightened ‘in winter, in the hour/ when the sun runs liquid then freezes’ (What the Light Teaches 129), presumably at sunset.

But in the midst of ‘panic’ (What the Light Teaches 129), the narrator is reminded of the light’s lesson. Some words can be of great use and benefit; they can be the ‘right words’ (Nussbaum) and in this capacity they can facilitate the transformation of the narrator’s negative emotion. She hears her sister’s voice ‘in [her] head’ (What the Light Teaches 129). Perhaps she is recollecting or re-hearing the sister reciting poems *in the old language* (What the Light Teaches 121). Thereby she enacts Michaels’s (1994: 15) belief, which we have encountered above, in memory and love being strengthened by repeated avowal. The sister’s voice seems to melt the frozen sunlight, which has become moonlight at this later hour, and confirms the light’s lesson, because ‘slowly [the sister] translate[s] fear into love,/ the way the moon’s blood is the sea’ (What the Light Teaches 129).

The final line perhaps constitutes the last of the events that the narrator experiences viscerally, in that we are presented with an image that includes *blood* (albeit as a metaphor), which is not an organ of the body as such but is equally vital to survival. The poem concludes with this triple image: First, the moon is personified as having blood; second, that blood is metaphorised as the sea; and third, there is the attendant astronomical fact of the moon exerting a gravitational force on the sea’s tides. We humans should feel such an effect too, partly because our bodies are made up of about 60 per cent of water. Perhaps Michaels is combining these factors and suggesting that the power of the sister’s voice is as great as the power of the planets; it succeeds in transforming a highly debilitating emotion (fear) into a highly beneficial one (love), just as blood

⁸⁰ See Chapter 3, pages 147–8.

has the power to keep us alive, and just as the moon causes the oceans to surge and recede. Here we see that Michaels has extended the image of water-as-river that pervades the poem to present the image of water-as-sea. The event that the narrator experiences in the last line adds a layer to Michaels's all important personal–universal alliance by being, in this way, universal as well as visceral – figured in the body, in the world and in the universe.

In their differing yet overlapping ways, both Michaels and Celan seem to use their poetry to incite the caring in their readers that Berger (2001: 450) believes poetry elicits from language in general, as we have seen in Chapter 2.⁸¹ Celan achieves a startling 'intimacy', which is the 'result of the poem's labour' (Berger 2001: 451), with the child narrator and his mother in 'Black Flakes', and with recently deceased Jews in 'Death Fugue'. In each case he labours – an activity that seems always in Celan's life to be strenuous – to bring together that which the 'violence' of anti-Semitism 'has torn apart' (Berger 2001: 450): perhaps himself and his mother, and himself and his parents and the Jewish community, respectively. Originating from a source of emotion, the poems seem emotional (caring) also in their intention. Nevertheless, by the end of his life, Celan seems to have been, like Jakob for many years in *Fugitive Pieces*, unable to extricate himself from the practice of a predominantly sympathetic form of remembering his dead. Had he learned the lesson of the light, perhaps, he would have been able to remember his parents and fellow Jews in the appropriate manner.

Michaels's caring is as insightful, profound and figurative as is Celan's, though less personally motivated; her caring is far more conventional than Celan's in terms of remaining within the accepted bounds of grammatical correctness, and thus is more open to interpretation; and her caring encompasses a wider selection of subject matter than does Celan's. She is the originator of the lesson of the light; it is from her that we can learn the appropriate manner of remembrance. Thus, in contrast to Celan's painful and only partially successful engagement with caring, caring in Michaels's hands is a success and a balm.

⁸¹ See Chapter 2, page 83.