

## Conclusion

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*Even among the supremely good ... there is an ideal beauty of goodness  
the invoked action of which is to raise the artistic faith to its maximum.*

*Then truly, I hold, one's theme may be said to shine.*

James (1937: 309)

Henry James makes the above pronouncement in reference to his novel *The Ambassadors* (1903), which he considered to be his best work. Felicitously and perhaps not too surprisingly, there is evidently much in James's belief that resonates with the ideas of other writers that we have encountered in preceding chapters and also that we can apply to the work of Anne Michaels. The 'supremely good' to whom James refers is represented by some of the subjects of his novels, the potentially real people whom he presents as his characters. I suggest that Athos in Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* is one such character, and Michaela is another; the narrator's sister in Michaels's poem 'What the Light Teaches' is a third.

Athos does a great deal of good. His manuscript *Bearing False Witness*, for example, not only records the injustice of the Nazis' destruction of Biskupin and murder of his colleagues, it holds deeper significance as well. If we recall from Chapter 2 Michaels's expression of belief in the moral nature of memory – what we tend to remember deliberately is what our conscience remembers (Michaels 1994: 15) – we see that Athos's manuscript particularly exemplifies (moral) memorialising because, in Jakob's view, it '*was his conscience*' (FP 104, emphasis added). Athos writes the manuscript in order to prevent the Nazis' murderous actions from 'steal[ing]' from each of those men 'his life' (FP 120). Furthermore, he saves Jakob literally as a child, and gives him invaluable instructions for saving himself as an adult. He teaches Jakob about doing good. He helps Jakob immeasurably.

Michaela understands Jakob; her world view is similar to his (Nussbaum) and she shares her own memories with him. She grasps the import of his orphaned and sibling-less life, and she accepts his close connection with his sister Bella, whom she helps him to see as a spirit rather than as a ghost. She participates in loving dialogue (Nussbaum) with him, and indeed one of her final instances of communication – her note about her pregnancy (FP 278–9) – is the promise of the fulfilment of one of his treasured dreams. She helps Jakob immeasurably.

The sister in 'What the Light Teaches' shares her farm with the narrator, her sister, as she shares her knowledge about the Russian poets. Accompanying the narrator on her journey through the inappropriate kind of forgetting (Michaels), she also joins her in returning to the past by remembering happier times, before the horror and sorrow of the Holocaust, and by reading poems in the untainted language of old. She, too, lies awake at night like the narrator, 'watching [her] husband's sleeping body/ rise with breath' (What the Light Teaches 126). The sister anticipates her sister's arrival at the farm with joy; when the narrator at last appears, the sister 'flies] out of the darkness at [her]' (What the Light Teaches 127). Most important of all, with her voice the sister replaces fear with love for the narrator. She helps her sister immeasurably.

With regard to Athos and Michaela, it seems that morality is genuinely ingrained in their habitus (Bourdieu), that is, unconsciously. They behave morally simply by being themselves. Jakob, by contrast, may have embodied an incipient morality before the war (though it is difficult to tell, as scenes of his childhood reach us through the filter of his adult eyes), but his traumatic loss

perhaps dislodged him from his normal path and for many years has made his behaviour unnatural (Thompson and Bourdieu), to such an extent that he must learn, or re-learn, how to be moral. His life is a deeply painstaking, but eventually fully achieved, lesson in empathic identification (Gubar) and perceptual acuity (Scarry). The sister's case in 'What the Light Teaches' is slightly different; she seems to stand somewhere between Athos and Michaela at one side and Jakob at the other side. She, too, at first practises the inappropriate kind, the sympathetic kind, of forgetting, and it is not she but the narrator who gives us each item constituting the lesson of the light – it is the narrator who knows these items – but it is she (the sister) who causes the intensely negative emotion of fear to be converted into the intensely positive emotion of love for the narrator, and it is she who 'remind[s]' (What the Light Teaches 129) the narrator of how to practise the lesson of the light herself.

Athos, Michaela and the sister, and towards the end of their stories Jakob and the narrator, are at the pinnacle of the assembly; they are among the 'supremely good' alert winged creatures (James) that Michaels portrays. James feels that these characters can embody or enact goodness that itself will be ideal and beautiful. In this light, Michaels's characters at the pinnacle furthermore serve to support Scarry's faith in the attribute of beauty as being worthy of attention and of possession. In other words, there is usefulness in a thing, an object, being beautiful and attracting people's attention because of that beauty. Such usefulness is moral in that the beauty can cause Michaels to forget about herself (cf. Murdoch, Ricoeur), and us to forget about ourselves; the beauty can cause all of us to pay greater attention, through the process of communal or international regard, to other objects or things that also deserve our attention (Scarry). Equally deserving are our own loved ones, who may be deceased or dislodged from their normal path, as well as those in need around us, such as the disenfranchised who form the subject matter of Michaels's second novel, *The Winter Vault*, more of which we see below, and anyone else familiar or foreign to us who suffers the various forms of oppression.

By 'invok[ing]' the 'action[s]' of these characters, in James's terms, Michaels seems to 'raise [her] artistic faith to its maximum' in two senses. On the one hand, it may be safe to assume that her faith in humanity has been gradually rebuilt as Jakob's faith is restored in finding moments of goodness within the apparently overwhelmingly evil context of the Holocaust, ranging from the discovery that the moment filled with despair is also the moment suffused with grace (FP 168) to the realisation that an action that in peacetime seems insignificant in impact and in meaning can save someone's life in wartime (FP 162). As Michaels (in Watson 1996) explains, in the face of 'large forces' such as 'history', the 'small individual act can be incredibly powerful'. Michaels (in Watson 1996) may also believe, as she describes Jakob believing when he has examined the 'pyramid' photograph, that the faith exhibited by the bodies of the prisoners in the gas chamber is 'not reductive', but 'miraculous'.

On the other hand, perhaps we may surmise that any faith in humanity Michaels may have been awarded has affirmed her faith in her intentions as an author as well as in the medium in which she has chosen to write. The epigraph of the Introduction to this doctoral thesis cites Adam Gopnik's<sup>1</sup> plainly expressed view on faith in the fictionality, but also in the value, of fiction. 'Knowing something's made up while thinking that it matters is what all fiction insists on,' Gopnik (2006: 158) suggests. Having invented the stories comprising her novels and poems Michaels of course knows that they are 'made up'; she also thinks that they (her texts) 'matter' and that 'it' (their fictional nature) 'matters'.

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Gopnik (1956–), American writer, essayist and commentator.

Like Scarry, in other words, Michaels values the artefacts of creation while upholding the act of creating. If we remember, Scarry (1985: 307) describes the text – the poem or the novel – as a ‘freestanding artifact’. The author projects her perceptions into the artefact, which serves as a lever in reciprocating the perceptions to us, the readers. We can now state the conclusion that we have begun to move towards in Chapter 4. Michaels appears to add another dimension to the situation presented by Scarry. In line with Michaels’s treasuring of metaphor as a vital component of the artefact, perhaps we can see metaphor in her work as an artefact itself. We can analyse the notion in this way: Michaels projects her perceptions about the world, about the way people behave in the world and about what our behaviour means into the artefact of the metaphor, which in turn serves as the lever in reciprocating her (metaphorically presented) perceptions to us. In fact, with specific regard to Michaels’s work we can see metaphor as *the* artefact. Scarry identifies the poem or novel as the artefact, but the poem or novel written by Michaels would not exist without metaphor – thus, the poem or novel *is* metaphoric, metaphor *is* the poem or novel. In this light, it is even less possible to entertain the reproaches concerning the use of metaphor in Holocaust literary representation made by critics such as Henighan (2002) and Cook (2000).

The preceding part of the discussion has focused on Michaels’s Holocaust-related novel and on one of her poems that contains references to Holocaust, and Soviet, oppression. However, as has been suggested in the Introduction and confirmed in Chapter 2 of this doctoral thesis, we cannot accurately categorise Michaels as a Holocaust poet, not least of all because only four of her poems feature Holocaust-related references. Moreover, we should not define her as a Holocaust novelist simply because *Fugitive Pieces* is set during and following the Second World War and explores the effects of the myriad occurrences that constitute the ‘event’ of the Holocaust. We have found in the Introduction that Michaels (in Ogden 2004) firmly believes in using a ‘major historical event’ as the basis of a story’s plot and as an instrument for ‘shaping [the] characters and their relationship to the world around them’. Thus in Michaels’s work the Holocaust is an example of such a historical event, rather than being the subject matter that drives (all of) her work. Indeed, she ‘would hardly categorise [her]self as writing out of that experience as [her] primary source’ (Michaels 1996: 18).

These assertions are supported by the subject matter of Michaels’s second novel, *The Winter Vault*. The novel was published in 2009, at the time when the writing of this doctoral thesis was well under way, and thus we examine it here briefly. The reconstruction of the Abu Simbel temple and post-war Warsaw, and the building of the St Lawrence Seaway are the major historical events that provide the history to and setting of the story of Avery Escher, a civil engineer, and Jean, his botanist wife. The couple meet in Canada on the banks of the St Lawrence River during the Seaway construction, and Jean then accompanies Avery as his wife to Egypt, where he oversees the reconstruction of the temple. Their relationship suffers as a result of the loss of their child, who was stillborn, and they return to Toronto separately. While Avery immerses himself in graduate studies at the School of Architecture, Jean becomes the lover of Lucjan, a Polish artist who is preoccupied with the war-time destruction of Warsaw and the subsequent rebuilding of its Old City. Avery and Jean remain emotionally connected, however, and the novel ends with suggestions of a reconciliation between them.

The Second World War is referenced at times in the novel, but it is not the crux of the novel’s subject matter. The war is not, as Crown (2009) suggests, Michaels’s ‘confirmed territory’. Rather, according to Michaels (1996: 18) herself, the war was an ‘entry point’ for her ‘close examination of history in general, the meaning of history’. With regard to *Fugitive Pieces*, she elaborates that ‘the two things that ... concern [her] very much are the whole idea of unseen

forces (the events, cultural or historical, which shape us but which we do not live ourselves) and the issue of faith in the broadest use of that word' (Michaels 1996: 18). She explains:

War must be one of the most horrendous experiences one can live through. It forces people to carry things that are not only personal but much larger than themselves. I wanted to look as closely as I could at how people carry on, or how they perhaps can not only carry on but carry an event with them and still move towards a place of love in the world. (Michaels 1996: 18)

As I have sought to demonstrate in this doctoral thesis, Michaels's 'territory' (Crown) is wider, her concerns are broader and more philosophical. The Second World War, we have seen above, is an 'entry point' that, Michaels (1996: 18) acknowledges, is 'personally close to [her]', and it 'provided a very powerful doorway into many larger issues, philosophical issues, moral issues'. The themes of loss and dispossession, of recuperation and restitution, and of destruction and re-creation certainly arise in considerations of the war, but they also arise in other situations. Michaels (1996: 18) has 'banged [her] head against other large events as well'. Concomitantly, while there are developments in Michaels's oeuvre that suggest change in her thinking, other thematic developments in her work point to congruency rather than difference. There is a specific shift, for example, in her portrayal of the act of falling in love: In *Fugitive Pieces* (267) Ben identifies 'the one moment' a person 'bring[s]' their 'life entire to another', whereas in *The Winter Vault* (8) Jean realises that love 'is not the moment of bringing your whole life to another', but 'is everything you leave behind[,] at that moment'. However, Michaels's (in Crown 2009) three volumes of poetry 'were always intended to speak to one another', and the idea seems to hold true for her novels also, as she reasons:

I think one book washes you up on the shore of the next one. ... I started writing *The Winter Vault* before *Fugitive Pieces* was published; the second book came out of the first because it had led me to think more deeply about the notion of disenfranchisement. In the case of the Nubians [whose ancestral lands were washed away by the damming of the Nile], everything is taken from them. The question of how we commemorate that sort of loss runs through [*The Winter Vault*], alongside the notion of false consolation, which we see in the relocation of Abu Simbel and the rebuilding of Warsaw. Even if you replace something with the same thing – which is such an understandable impulse – it's still just that: a replication. Something essential has been lost. (Michaels, in Crown 2009)

Michaels's omniscient narrator expresses this idea at the start of the novel:

Avery knew that once the last temple stone had been cut and hoisted sixty metres higher, each block replaced, each seam filled with sand so there was not a grain of space between the blocks to reveal where they'd been sliced, ... the perfection of the illusion – the perfection itself – would be the betrayal. (*WV* 4)

Such thoughts do not contradict Michaels's faith in the value of restatement and reaffirmation that we have encountered in Chapter 4. The thoughts highlight the difference between replication and restatement, between attempting to recreate something anew exactly as it had been (however many centuries or just hours) before, and repeating something, such as a story or a memory through the generations, or the act of doing good. 'We think that when the moment of choice occurs, we will do the right thing,' Michaels (in Watson 1996, emphasis added) points out, 'but ... human integrity, human values have to be constantly practiced[,] so that when the moment calls for it, we *will* be able to respond.' As Jakob confirms in *Fugitive Pieces* (162): 'Good is proved true by repetition'.

In Chapter 3, we have learned that Michaels demonstrates Scarry's (1985) notion of imagination presenting and maintaining the fundamental moral distinction between hurting and not hurting.

In *The Winter Vault* Michaels (in Crown 2009) goes a step further, attempting to say, among other things, that ‘it is not enough not to do harm; one must also do good’. Despite the apparently irreparable damage that Jakob sustains in *Fugitive Pieces*, and despite Ben’s similar trauma, both men are saved – Jakob fully and Ben partially. Avery and Jean seem to gain equally favourable treatment in Michaels’s hands. ‘Regret and shame are not the end of the story’ of *The Winter Vault*, Michaels (in Crown 2009) points out; ‘they are its middle’. For much of the novel, Avery and Jean are victims of her disesteem, as Ricoeur (1992) puts it, but at the end they participate in ‘redemption ... of a very subtle nature’ (Michaels, in Crown 2009) and thus become beneficiaries of her esteem.

Let us summarise the contents of the preceding chapters, before bringing this doctoral thesis to a close. In Chapter 1, we have learned of the workings of language more generally from the language theorists Certeau (1984) and Bourdieu (1991), while the language theorist Ricoeur (1977, 1992) has demonstrated for us the ways in which metaphor, more specifically, functions. By presenting language as inherent to the relationship of domination in which they see people existing and by regarding language as biased in terms of ethics or lack thereof, these theorists show their awareness of the subjective nature of language – an awareness, we have learned in subsequent chapters, that Michaels shares. Through the detailed account provided by the philologist Klemperer (2000), we have discovered the effects of language in the hands of the Nazis as one particular group of producers-dominators, who sought and deplorably managed for a time to dominate the entire European Jewish race, the vast group of consumers-dominated.

The theoretical basis provided by the first three writers has helped us in Chapter 2 to begin exploring Michaels’s creative language. In this chapter, with the aid of Ricoeur, we have discussed Michaels participating through her novel *Fugitive Pieces* in the Holocaust literary debate that continues to demand attention long after Adorno’s famous injunction and subsequent clarifications. We have learned that Michaels’s initial hesitancy in revealing details of her personal life to us, her readers, has deepened into a conviction that our grasp of literary texts is obstructed by the creator’s personal circumstances. Nonetheless, we have found evidence to suggest, not so paradoxically, that Michaels’s personal motivation is an essential component of her writing practice. We have traced elements of social and physical domination suggested by Bourdieu that are not Holocaust-related in her work as well. The notions of empathic identification (Gubar) and the corpse poem (Fuss) have further illuminated for us, at times by contrast, the nature of her prose and poetry. Finally, we have explored her technique of standing in for some of her real-life poetic subjects, which presents similarities to and differences from Bourdieu’s notion of the spokesperson.

In Chapter 3, we have established that Klemperer’s account of the Nazis’ use of the German language confirms and clarifies Michaels’s views of language in general, and metaphor in particular, being manipulated by Nazi and Soviet oppressors to immoral ends. We have seen how, in *Fugitive Pieces* and in her extended poem ‘What the Light Teaches’, Michaels demonstrates the devastatingly destructive effects of the producers’ domination, taking place partly through their enforcement of the ‘legitimate’ language, on the dominated. Scarry and Berger’s (2001) thoughts on the act of torture, illuminated by the case of victim of Nazi torture Jean Améry, further assert the harm that language can suffer as well as demonstrate its abilities and failures with regard to the expression and consequences of the experience of physical pain.

It is understandable that as a persecuted German Jew, Klemperer found little hope in his Holocaust experiences. Michaels, by contrast, presents a powerful case for the beneficial, restorative function of language, as we have seen in Chapter 3 is demonstrated in several of her texts. We have learned that Scarry’s portrayal of the attributes of the act of imagining or creating

underscores and finds parallels with Michaels's approach in this regard. We have also found that examples of domination of a linguistic nature, as described by Bourdieu, are evident in Michaels's work, in both negative and positive forms.

Finally, in this chapter we have applied an idea presented by Nussbaum (1985) about the moral nature of writing in general, and Henry James's writing in particular, to Michaels's work and her role as an author. Using characters and certain scenes of *Fugitive Pieces* as Nussbaum uses characters and certain scenes of James's novel *The Golden Bowl*, we have demonstrated conclusively that Michaels is a moral author who produces moral literature and elicits the enactment of morality in us.

Chapter 4 constitutes the forum in which we have explored a particular metaphor presented by Michaels in her poem 'What the Light Teaches', using the Holocaust poet Paul Celan as a point of comparison. The image of language as a home seems directly applicable to the dispossessed Celan, and perhaps even to the similarly traumatised Jakob, but, as we have learned, for differing reasons Celan did not inhabit, nor does Jakob inhabit, language in the way that the narrator suggests refugees can do. Our discussion of Celan as a corpse poet has brought to light other similarities and differences between his creative approach and work and those of Michaels. We have established furthermore that the language-as-a-home image does not apply to any of Michaels's poetic subjects, with the single possible exception of Mandelstam as presented in 'The Weight of Oranges'. The metaphor, then, has emerged as applying specifically to people such as the three Russian poets Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam and Akhmatova and certain unnamed Holocaust victims whom Michaels highlights through the narrator and her sister in 'What the Light Teaches'.

In the second half of the chapter, we have briefly explored the biographies of the Russian poets, and then have carried out a close reading of the poem that includes engaging with Michaels's references to them therein. We have emphasised, in the reading, the images of light and water that occur throughout the poem, and have discussed how Michaels utilises the image of water, along with language, as a repository of memory, and the images of water and light as facilitators of memory and message-bearers of positive and negative aspects of personal and historical life. By the end of the close reading, we have divined the lesson of the light. Michaels (1992: 96) believes that without metaphor the poem, and we can extend the idea to encompass the novel, 'remains mired in the self; the lights are out, the poem stays dark'. Thus richly, 'nourishingly' figurative language proves illuminating in conveying to us the light's lesson.

Perhaps I can summarise the lesson in language that avoids being flat, toneless and lifeless (Nussbaum) by virtue of being the very standing terms (James) of Michaels's lyrically splendid (Nussbaum) language: Michaels teaches that the appropriate kind of remembrance, and by extension the appropriate kind of celebration of life, entails the broad process of naming. This process is divided into the more specific processes of re-'naming' plain words – that is, the reiteration of words from the past that have not been tainted by an oppressor – in order to give new meaning to those who utter them in the present, of voicing the actual names of the deceased and the yet living, and of carefully preserving the memory of the deceased and the living-memory of the yet living through the description and re-description of ordinary personal/particular and historical/international facts and opinions, pieces of knowledge and feelings.

In conclusion, I have sought to show in this doctoral thesis that Anne Michaels is a particularly thoughtful and imaginative writer; her poetry and prose are highly evocative, the reading of them

an especially sense-stimulating experience. Her creative output to date spans more than 20 years<sup>2</sup> and a vast number of hours in which she has steeped herself in the practices of detailed factual research, interpretation of people's behaviour through the centuries and the consequences thereof, and imaginative, empathic, moral portrayal of real-life and realistic people known and unknown, both to her and to us. Michaels (in Watson 1996) is courageous in having 'some kind of relationship' with the fact that 'the whole first half of the [20th] century was dominated by war'; she is courageous in contemplating and trying to find the answers to specific haunting questions (Michaels, in *Gazette* 1997); and she is courageous not only in facing 'things that aren't safe', 'enormous things', but also in providing a safe space in which her readers can consider these things (Michaels, in Crown 2009). She does not dress horror up in attractive clothing, and she does not conceal tragedy. She is not afraid to serve as an agent who distributes punishment, in Ricoeur's terms, to the victims of her disesteem. Like real people, her characters suffer. But like real people they also act and are compensated; Michaels is ever an agent who distributes rewards to the beneficiaries of her esteem (Ricoeur).

Thus, if we were to go back in time and attend one of Michaels's Creative Writing courses, we would receive the advice she gave to her students then. But her instructions are put into practice in her texts, and thus we have no need of travelling back in time. We must strive, in the present, to avoid obtuseness and to be people on whom nothing of life is lost (James). If we pay close and moral attention to Michaels's poetry and prose, if we strive to exercise perceptual acuity (Scarry), we stand a better than usual chance of producing, if we so wish, our own decent poems and novels. We can write texts that demonstrate our awareness of the precise manner in which metaphor works (Ricoeur) and that use metaphors effectively, texts that enact empathic identification (Gubar), texts that privilege the recuperative power of language over its destructive power, texts that use standing terms judiciously and present alert winged creatures (James).

If we have no such creative impulse, we can still prove worthy of Michaels's moral achievement on our behalf (Nussbaum): Our moral attention to moral texts like Michaels's can facilitate our practice of moral living; our whole conduct can represent our lucid engagement with and interpretation of our social experiences (James). It would never be a selfish but always a selfless act, for as Scarry (1985: 324) explains, 'multiple artifacts collectively continue' the work of reducing sentience's aversiveness and enhancing its acuity – our 'culture' becomes the lever or object that, in boomerang fashion, facilitates our 'evolution' as humans. Guided by a moral author like Michaels, then, we learn to develop our moral selves and perpetuate the well-lived life (Nussbaum). Some of the shine (James) of Michaels's themes can rub off onto us, and perhaps we too will shine.

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<sup>2</sup> Indeed, she declares that she had 'the beginning and the ending' of *Fugitive Pieces* in mind 'as early as 1980' (Michaels, in Watson 1996).