

Between Earth Science and Language/Writing Imagery: How to Render the Workings of Memory in Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*

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In *Fugitive Pieces*, the Canadian poet and author Anne Michaels writes one of these rare North American novels which deals with the Holocaust and its aftermath. Published in 1996, her first novel explores the workings of memory in connection with the Shoah. *Fugitive Pieces* is evidently the novel of a poet since the language Michaels uses in her novel is indeed the language of poetry. The book abounds in images and metaphors from many different fields, such as music, geology, meteorology, and archeology. The author works within the framework of different realms of imagery, two of which are most striking: first, her usage of earth science imagery, including geology, archeology, and meteorology, and second, the language/writing realm of images. Hence, I will focus my investigation on the function of these two realms of Michaels' poetical language within the context of Holocaust remembrance and the myriad complex processes involved in the workings of memory.

Even though the plot and the characters of *Fugitive Pieces* motivate much of the references to earth science and writing—the protagonist Jakob is a translator and poet, and his savior and teacher Athos is a geologist and archeologist—Michaels' employment of these areas of imagery exceeds the mere plot-line of the novel. Rather, her excessive use of these images points to her preoccupation with the nature of memory which plays such a significant role in the literary representation of the Shoah, since, as Efraim Sicher claims, “memory is important to give meaning to the future and to form identity” (19). Michaels' poetic language serves as a means of rendering the workings of memory—not just any memory, but the memory of the Holocaust, which is always situated in the context of the Jewish tradition of remembrance and the responsibility to the past and the dead.

In 1994, Geoffrey H. Hartman writes in his introduction to *Holocaust*

Remembrance: Shapes of Memory that “we think of memory as a residue left in the mind by the ruins of time, and capable of retrieving and even restoring the past” (1) and cites Schliemann’s search for and excavations of Homer’s Troy as an example of how the workings of memory were predominately seen at the end of the last century. Memory retrieval was regarded as fieldwork such as that done when layers upon layers of sediment are cleared away in order to find relics from the past. This simple model is based on the understanding of memory as a recovering of shapes and relics, which, according to Hartman, proves especially problematic in relation to the remembrance of the Holocaust. Hartman comes to reject the metaphor of Schliemann’s successful excavations as a terrible coda and looks for a guiding and different image for the recollections of the Holocaust past. “Caught between a morbid and necessary remembrance,” Hartman finds that the ash which literally covered Jewish life “is more contaminating than what may have buried a millennial Troy or a Pompeii calcified by natural disaster” (1994: 2). Yet, the set of images related to memory as a kind of archeological quest proves to be persistent in the discussion on Holocaust remembrance. For example, Norman Ravvin returns to it when he writes in *A House of Words: Jewish Writing, Identity, and Memory* that there still is “the promise of recovery among ruins, an acceptance of changes wrought by passing generations alongside a steadfast need to reincorporate—at least in the imaginary realm—a world that has vanished, its remnants obscured by woodlands and geological loam” (1997: 5). This ‘recovery among ruins’ leads to the analogy between archeological enterprises and memory retrieval, especially in the case of Holocaust remembrance.

In Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*, this analogy is particularly obvious in her emphasis on earth science imagery. However, she also accounts for a newer memory model. A more recent model of memory informing *Fugitive Pieces* is the one which contains the notion of memory as actively reflecting or recalling its own modeling process. Thomas Wägenbaur argues in his essay “Memory and Recollection: The Cognitive and Literary Model” for yet another

metaphor of memory which is writing itself. Since memory simultaneously works as “static storage and dynamic *story*-telling,” the similarities between memory and writing lie in the fact that memory works like and is a narrative and “any *narrative* does it both: it stores information, but then it does this by representing what is absent through metaphorical, metonymical, or synecdochal sign processes” (Wägenbaur 1998: 4). What is proposed here, as opposed to a **representational** model of memory which relies on the notions of storage and retrieval, is a **performative** model based on the creative role of retention and recall (Wägenbaur 1998: 4). Or to say it differently, there has been a shift from the storage to the story model of memory, and this shift underlies *Fugitive Pieces* and Michaels’ use of imagery. Illustrating these two different models of memory, her novel is concerned with the workings of memory in the face of the ultimate destruction. “Yet who can render the workings of memory?”, asks Geoffrey H. Hartman (1996: 23); Michaels’ novel is a successful attempt to do just that.

Anne Michaels’ choice for the chapter titles of *Fugitive Pieces* already claims the importance of the earth science imagery that represents the workings of her protagonists’ memories. For example, the first part of her novel, Jakob Beer’s story, starts with “The Drowned City,” continues with “The Stone-Carriers,” “Vertical Time,” “The Way Station,” “Phosphorus,” “Terra Nullius,” and ends with “The Gradual Instant.” These titles signify how Michaels’ preoccupation with earth science draws the attention to the analogy between the physical and mental world of her protagonists, between the geographical journey and the emotional one, between geological processes and the workings of memory.

The novel starts by creating a link between archeological quest and the story of the survival and the remembrance of the Jewish boy and first-person narrator Jakob Beer. After Nazis break into his home in Biskupin, Poland, and kill his parents and sister, seven-year-old Jakob flees and hides by digging a hole in the peat bogs. After days of hiding, hunger and desperation drive Jakob out of his hole. Emerging from the peat bogs he calls himself “bog-boy,”

smelling of peat and squirming from the marshy ground like an “afterbirth of earth” (*FP* 5). When Jakob leaves his hiding place in the peat bogs, the first person he stumbles upon is Athos, a geologist and archeologist, whose work is to find traces of the past in the physical elements of the earth. Later in the novel, Athos teaches Jakob the importance of looking for history in sedimentation and landscape forms as, for example, in river sediments and canyons. Sedimentary rocks serve for Athos as an image for human history and memory. Layer upon layer of history accumulates and waits to be brought into the open. Investigating “rock strata” (*FP* 95), “the great mystery of the wood” (*FP* 29), and taking Jakob on weekly excursions through the prehistoric ravines of Toronto, Athos guides Jakob through geological time and thereby through the pain of his memories and his personal history.

For Athos, historical events are the result of a chain of other events much like geological events are of a chain of events, as, for example, is the case in the formation of sedimentary rock or peat. The shapes of memory are the shapes Athos finds in the natural world and in applying the geologic to the human, he analyzes social changes as he would analyze processes of sedimentation; thus “he constructed his own historical topography” (*FP* 119). As earth history is embedded in the solidified structures of the landscape, so is human history encoded in natural and geological shapes. Since the workings of memory are much like archeological and geological endeavors, Athos reads human and social history **and** geological processes according to their common characteristics, both typified by “slow persuasion and catastrophe. Explosions, seizures, floods, glaciation” (*FP* 119). Jakob learns from Athos to read history from earth shapes, and so, for example, he personifies landscape when he says, “The landscape of the Peloponnesus has been injured and healed so many times, sorrow darkened the ground. [...] I stood in the valleys and imagined the grief of the hills. I felt my own grief expressed there” (*FP* 60). It seems as if the only way to grasp and to express the horrors of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust, on a personal and collective level, is to go back to natural phenomena. Finding analogies between the history of people and the

history of the earth enables Jakob as well as Athos to endow the disrupted history of the Jewish people with meaning and thus to bear witness as survivors of the Holocaust. In *Fugitive Pieces*, Athos and Jakob tell and retell the story of their survival, of the Holocaust, and of Holocaust remembrance in terms of the history of natural phenomena. As Emily Miller Budick suggests, “to survivors and nonsurvivors the Holocaust has always seemed to be beyond our ability to know it and therefore to represent it” (1998: 329). In order to represent it at all and to make it possible to name the horror and the trauma, Jakob and Athos transfer their wartime experiences into the realm of geology and archeology.

In Jakob’s collection of poems, titled *Groundwork*, he compares the workings of memory to geological and archeological work, reading the structures of ‘deep time’ and dealing with the past as a possible ‘recovery among ruins.’ Delving into the nature of Holocaust remembrance is like doing fieldwork: “How you descended into horror slowly, as divers descend, with will and method. How, as you dropped deeper, the silence pounded” (*FP* 266). However, Jakob is troubled about the relationship between time, history, and memory. When and how are experiences of past events turned into memories and how and why do we actually remember them? Jakob ultimately arrives at the knowledge that “every moment is two moments” (*FP* 138); a moment is simultaneously past, present, and part of one’s memory. But moreover, as Ludwig Wittgenstein observed, we in fact only have a notion of the past from recollecting it, and this is where the performative model of memory comes in (qtd. in Wägenbaur 1998: 6). Memories, in this model, **constitute** but not **restitute** a passed event: so the stories that we recollect about our life are certainly our stories but they never re-present the past (Wägenbaur 1998: 6). Yet, what does it mean for *Fugitive Pieces*?

Geoffrey H. Hartman asserts that “[i]ncreasingly, the younger generation writing about the Holocaust incorporate a reflection on how to write it, a reflection on representation itself” (1996: 9). In *Fugitive Pieces*, the author acknowledges that collective and personal memory are largely shaped by

telling stories and writing texts. Re-presentations of the Holocaust exit only in the form of narratives. Her protagonists struggle with what they remember and with the memory of not remembering anything, all of them ponder the mechanisms by which the past can be accurately or inaccurately preserved and reconstructed. In employing language and writing as the novel's central metaphors, metaphors for the workings of memory as well as metaphors for dealing with the Holocaust itself, Michaels attempts to render the workings of the story model of memory in her novel.

Jakob Beer translates and writes poetry, thus his literary work most clearly embodies the self-reflexive side of memory whose "external location being writing" (Wägenbaur 1998: 14). His several volumes of poetry based on his experiences as a Holocaust survivor manifest the mental processes at work in writing poetry and remembering in poetic and self-reflexive terms. Jakob explains that "[t]he poet moves from life to language, the translator moves from language to life; both, like the immigrant, try to identify the invisible, what's between the lines, the mysterious implications" (*FP* 109). He realizes how his writing actually mirrors the workings of his memory, proving that "poets know more about memories than psychologists do" (Ross 1991: 3). Since the patterns of memory and the organization of experiences are structurally comparable to coherent stories, Jakob, in writing poetry and notebooks, comes to understand what his recollections, which are "only possible through self-reference" (Wägenbaur 1998: 14), mean for his life. As Hartman argues with Freud, memory that goes into storytelling enables experiencing and allows the real to enter consciousness and word-presentation, to be something more than trauma (1996: 158-59). Marred by the trauma of witnessing the murder of his parents by German soldiers and guilty of having survived, writing poetry and notebooks becomes the only way for Jakob to come to terms with absence, loss, and remembrance.

As Thomas Wägenbaur argues, memory operates not like a storage machine but as a non-trivial machine that has "a constant feedback of its own output as its input" (5). Therefore, memory, which "is always its own

construct,” is able to make choices with references to new and existing information and memory’s greatest achievement is to discriminate between recollection and forgetting (Wägenbaur 1998: 5). Jakob’s memory works just like that. When Jakob first comes to Canada, the English language confuses and eludes him. He struggles with it, yet eventually realizes the positive potential when he says that “English was a sonar, a microscope, through which I listened and observed, waiting to capture elusive meanings buried in facts” (*FP* 112). When he begins to write down his childhood memories in English he appreciates English because it “could protect me; an alphabet without memory” (*FP* 101). As much as he searches for the workings of memory and his own personal memories in processes of vertical time and other natural phenomena, he investigates language, and in particular English, for its power to excavate meanings that are buried and for its power to create a narrative or story, because “the story model of memory forces us to remember coherently in order to convince others and ourselves of the past” (Wägenbaur 1998: 8). This model of memory recalls its own modeling process and it interprets its own self-referential activities in the neural networks in the brain. As it is based on being a performance instead of a representation, it is not necessarily true and does not need to be. These stories function to convince ourselves and others, yet our stories do not turn our recollections into objective reports of passed events, they only modify our subjective narratives of the past that are produced in the present (Wägenbaur 1998: 9). The act of recollection is a construction of passed events and the past but never refers to a definite knowledge about it. This is why Jakob constantly reflects on language’s ability to shape his memories and vice versa. At times, he finds language inappropriate to convey elusive remembrance and absent or painful recollections. Consequently, Jakob wants to invent a style that marks this absence or, rather, the memory of absence. “I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language” (*FP* 111), and later he says “[l]anguage. The numb tongue attaches itself, orphan, to any sound it can: it sticks, tongue to

cold metal. [...] There's a heavy black outline around things separated from their names" (*FP* 95). On the other hand, Jakob acknowledges that "I already knew the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate. But poetry, the power of language to restore: this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach me" (*FP* 79). Although Jakob feels that his life "could not be stored in any language but only in silence" (*FP* 111), he nevertheless attempts to find a poetic language that is able to express the fine line between recollection and forgetting and the difference between passed event and present recollection. Jakob comes to understand that "to exist historically is to perceive the events one lives through as part of a story later to be told" (Danto 1985: 342-43). Poetry writing and his notebooks become devices to capture meanings and to re-construct his lifestory while reflecting on the story-performance of his own recollections.

Let me end by saying that in *Fugitive Pieces*, Michaels succeeds in rendering the workings of memory. Her earth science and language imagery is a means to convey how memories work and how the past can be and is integrated into the present and future, whereby the end is never forgetting but reflecting on the limitations and reconstructions of the re-presentation of the Holocaust. With her first novel, Anne Michaels counters the Nazis' 'war on memory' and gives proof to Philip Roth's conviction that post-Holocaust writers will be obliged again and again to voice the one major story of recent Jewish history that matters: the story of the Holocaust (Budick 1998: 339).

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