

At the Membrane of Language and Silence

Metaphor and Memory in *Fugitive Pieces*

The essence of the metaphor is quiddity. In order for each component to work successfully simultaneously, each must work in its own context, otherwise we perceive the metaphor as artificial, as “falsely poetic.”

—Anne Michaels, “Cleopatra’s Love.”

Theodor Adorno’s famous dictum that to “write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (*Prisms* 34) is not merely an indictment against lyric poetry as a genre but against all literature, a stern warning to all writing that in the wake of the Holocaust it must find new ways to represent the elisions and failures of grief when it is used as a system of discourse.¹ The problem of writing *after* is also the problem of how to represent the impossible event faithfully while avoiding a betrayal both of history and of the victim. As a genre that tries to accommodate the impossible nature of representation, the testimony² is composed of fragmentation and memory, in which the attempt at narrative is overwhelmed by events that refuse to settle into coherence, understanding, or knowledge.

Insofar as it rejects just such an exhaustive account of history and trauma, presenting itself instead in fragmented form, Anne Michaels’ novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, defines itself as a “narrative of catastrophe and slow accumulation” (48) and a reworking of history as the “gradual instant” of cataclysm (77). Jakob Beer’s first-generation testimony and later Ben’s second-generation account of witnessing present themselves in writing that is lyrical, highly poetic and densely metaphoric. In her arrangement of memory and history as necessarily fragmented and in her use of the poetic voice to articulate the vicissitudes of lived experience, Michaels’ novel is, in many ways, a response to

Adorno's implicit challenge: if it is no longer possible to write after Auschwitz is the only alternative to remain silent?

Other writers have cautioned against this last expedient. The poet Paul Celan, himself a Holocaust survivor, warns, in the preface to his *Selected Poems*, that silence may provide yet another fetish to waylay the reader (45).³ Holocaust literature is populated by increasingly reluctant narrators who know that it is impossible to narrate what happened and so are compelled to tell and retell what was witnessed; at the same time, however, they are haunted by the conviction that they have betrayed memory by doing so. Jakob Beer, who narrates the first three quarters of Michaels' novel is no exception:

And even if an act could be forgiven, no one could bear the responsibility of forgiveness on behalf of the dead. No act of violence is ever resolved. When the one who can forgive can no longer speak, there is only silence. (160-61)

Jakob's response to the hopelessness of silence on the part of the dead is to take up the impossible but necessary task of narrating the event. In doing so he provides an aesthetic link between the fugitive pieces of the past and the promise of a coherent future. In the last quarter of the novel, Jakob's biographer, Ben, takes up his story and its resolution as a kind of deferred inheritance since Ben's own father has been stubbornly reticent on the subject of his survival experiences and denies his son the gift of "forgiveness on behalf of the dead."

Jakob's narrative memoir endeavors to create the means of articulating a historical experience that annihilates the very possibility of articulation, an address that, in many ways, Ben's response ironically fails to engage. Constructed as a narrative that cannot be fully captured in thought, memory, or writing, that cannot even be adequately transmitted from writer to reader, Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces* is a sustained exploration of memory, represented through imagery and metaphor, on the understanding that such writing is constituted by the very incomprehensibility of its occurrence.

The epigraph to *Fugitive Pieces* begins by announcing the fragility of memory symbolized by the loss and burial of "countless manuscripts—diaries, memoirs, eye witness accounts" which were mislaid or destroyed during the Second World War:

Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden—buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors—by those who did not live to retrieve them.

Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken; others lost, and sometimes recovered, by circumstances alone.

An extended metaphor of memory is constructed in the opening lines as that which, like “these narratives,” is essentially hidden, buried, and must be painstakingly retrieved by the memoirist or the reader.

When Freud, in *Moses and Monotheism*, compares the history of the Jews to the structure of a trauma, he describes trauma as the successive movement from an event to its repression and eventual return. This classic pattern of memory and its discontents is established early in Michaels’ narrative when Jakob Beer remembers the primal trauma of his young life: the moment when German soldiers burst into his home, killing his father and mother and disposing of his sister Bella in an undisclosed—because unknown—manner. The young boy who is the unwilling witness of this event closes his eyes but memory enters through sounds:

... the door breaking open, the spit of buttons. My mother, my father. But worse than those sounds was that I couldn’t remember hearing Bella at all. Filled with her silence, I had no choice but to imagine her face. (10)

The boy who is himself hidden like a concealed manuscript behind the wallpaper of the cupboard witnesses an event that is unrepresentable, an event that, in the words of Dori Laub, “precludes its registration” (*Testimony* 91).

This is the beginning of Jakob Beer’s existence as a traumatized subject, one who carries an impossible history and who will, in the course of the narrative, become a symptom of the history he cannot entirely possess. Jakob’s inability to witness the violent event as it occurs is characteristic of the traumatized subject whose “collapse of witnessing” (“Truth and Testimony” 65) is the inevitable outcome of the coherent self being split and dissociated at the moment of impact.

The child who witnesses, albeit imperfectly, the effacement of his sister’s memory, the silence that surrounds the forgetfulness in which her absence has been articulated, finds himself compelled to imagine her face in an alien medium—the medium of sound. Throughout this early narrative, silence—the silence in which the narrator “couldn’t remember hearing Bella at all” (10)—is linked with amnesia while sound is both feared and welcomed as a way back into memory. “I did not witness the most important events of my life,” Jakob says of his younger self, “my deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound” (17). The child who is alternately buried behind the wall or under the ground for much of the early narrative exists *via* his auditory faculty, one ear obsessively pressed against “the vibrating membrane . . . the thin wall between the living and the dead” (31). Aware

that sound can never be erased or entirely destroyed (“If sound waves carry on to infinity, where are their screams now?” 54), the young Jakob Beer imagines his sister’s face as an ever changing variety of sound patterns that record her familiar breath, the sound of her singing or piano-playing, the register of her incantation and invective.⁴

If the literature of remembrance is, as Shoshana Felman maintains, an “alignment between witnesses” (14), what might this alignment mean and of whom might these witnesses be composed? In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, for example, Freud suggests that at least two subjects are required to witness the unconscious; the therapist, and the patient whose testimony resonates within the interpretive discourse of the physician. Testimony is characteristically structured as a writing that seeks out a responsive listener, an empathetic “you” who hears and understands the impossible narrative testimony of the estranged “I.”⁵ In the case of *Fugitive Pieces*, Jakob’s project of address is complicated by his awareness that both victim and perpetrator, together with self-proclaimed witness, make up the haunting trinity of the testimony.

Jakob, who has learned the value of witnessing from his mentor, Athos—“Write to save yourself,” Athos tells him, “and someday you’ll write because you’ve been saved” (165)—writes his memoir for any number of conceivable reasons: to memorialize those who are in danger of being forgotten, to catch and record the “gradual instant” of historical time, and to remain present to the impossible task of representing what is essentially inconceivable and therefore unrepresentable. Perhaps most compulsively, however, he writes in order to achieve subject-hood, in order to know who he once was and who he now is through the self-knowledge that is afforded in the process of all autobiographical narratives but nowhere so intensely as in the testimony.⁶

In turn, Ben is the storyteller of the second generation, the one who takes up Jakob’s narrative precisely because of the potential for healing he discerns in the act of storytelling.⁷ When he first meets Jakob he is struck by the other man’s ability to listen “redemptively,” to make him feel “clear” and “clean,” as if talk can “heal” the silences of evasion and prohibition that he experiences in his own home (208). Possessed by the same anxiety of witnessing that Jakob feels, the sense of exaggerated responsibility engendered by the conviction of the witness that his perception is necessary to the well-being of the world, Ben articulates the belief that “somehow my watching

causes it to happen” (280). As the child of survivors too traumatized to construct a story from the fugitive pieces that make up their experience of the Holocaust, Ben is accustomed to the “damp silence of not hearing and not speaking” (204).⁸

Both Jakob and Ben are aware of the paradox that, once narrated, the horror or obscenity is no longer either horrifying or obscene: instead it is essentially narratable, representable. The literal event or trauma resists “cure” to the extent that it remains literal. In this sense Michaels’ project in *Fugitive Pieces* might be perceived as an attempt to metaphorize history, memory, and narrative precisely in order to challenge the literal, to articulate catastrophe in language that is poetic and densely allusive. Yet, Michaels’ lush, poetic discourse jars uneasily with the horrors she is narrating and so contributes to our discomfort as readers, at the same time that it provides a way of thinking about metaphor and metonymy as figurative devices that alternatively reveal and conceal the materiality of the event.⁹

In a text so obsessed with language—translation and its slippages, puns and crossword puzzle clues, word play, palindromes and revealing parapraxis—the poetic narrative often falters upon misconstruals and evasions. When Jakob relates how the Jews of Zakynthos “vanished” in the wake of Nazi invasion he does so in language that masks the violence of their fate with a disturbingly inaccurate simile:

After burying the books and dishes, the silverware and photos, the Jews of Zakynthos ghetto vanish. They slip into the hills, where they wait like coral; half flesh, half stone. (40)

The beauty and fragility of the image—the fugitive Jews compared to coral wrenched as it is from its element and hidden in the hills—provides a highly romanticized icon of what actually happened to these people. Far from remaining caught in an Ovidian state of metamorphosis, the Jews of Zakynthos were dispersed, systematically hunted, and summarily slaughtered, and in metaphorizing their fate Michaels unwittingly conceals the decidedly unpoetic nature of genocide.

This issue raises the larger question of the function of the lyric voice in the narrative as a whole. When brutality, love-making, and the pragmatism of daily living are all described in Michaels’ habitual mode of high lyricism, a prevailing flatness results. Many of the love scenes, for example, fail to move the reader because the elegiac tone in which they are described has already been used to effect in scenes of violence and horror:

Instead of the dead inhaling my breath with their closeness, I am deafened by the buzzing drone of Michaela's body, the power lines of blood, blue threads under her skin. Cables of tendons; the forests of bone in her wrists and feet. (180-81)

This passage seems over-written, a consequence, perhaps, of words being at once not enough and too much to contain representation adequately. When such metaphorically (over)lush language is used to express the romantic subplot, no contrast between form and content is possible and this failure results in a sentimental discourse. In contrast, however, the reader is able to sustain belief in a poetic narrative that clashes disturbingly with the horror described. Perhaps the point is that when metaphoric language is used indiscriminately to represent both eyewitness account and romantic experience, the reader fails to distinguish between the relative importance assigned to each.

The quoted extract brings up a further problem: perhaps the most disappointing aspect of this otherwise complex and magnificently realized attempt to render the Holocaust representable is Michaels' consistent tendency to idealize the women her male characters love. Michaela is described as having a mind like a "palace" (176), her face has the goodness of Beatrice de Luna and she is credited with the "devotion of a hundred Kievan women" (178). Admittedly this is the description provided by her poetic husband, Jakob; however almost all the women in this novel are described in elegiac and highly romanticized language. Irena Salman is a "small, an impeccable package," who, in the space of a few lines, is compared to both a tea cup and a child (209). Ben's wife, Naomi, gives herself "natural as breathing" (233), she collects lullabies and is described as "blunt and sweet" (248), she opens like a flower (230), and appears to be almost as passive since she is constructed as the archetypal waiting, nurturing woman who cooks Russian food to accompany Ben's textual voyages across the steppes:

While I travelled across Russia in leg-irons, Naomi carefully placed ivory potatoes, cooked until they crumbled at the touch of a fork, into chilled vermilion borscht. While I fell to my knees with hunger in the snow at Tobol'sh, downstairs Naomi sliced thick slabs of stone-heavy bread. (212)

The exaggerated discourse of the male quest is off-set by Naomi, who, like Ben's mother, appears to be the unappreciated support of her husband's life-long anguish. At one point Ben compares his parents' experience of the war and contends that what his father underwent was "that much less bearable" (223), a conclusion that makes sense only if we consider that women

are allowed to experience very little in this text compared to their male counterparts. And, like Ben's mother, who is described in a final image as standing behind his father and stroking his hair (294), Naomi is the eternal consoler to whom Ben returns after his encounter with the demonic Petra.

At times Michaels' text is so preoccupied with the figurative function of language that it seems impossible for characters to obtain factual information to direct questions. "Athos, how big is the actual heart?" Jakob asks (113), the adjective signaling that it is empirical information he requires. Yet Athos answers, predictably, in lyric vein, "imagine the size and heaviness of a handful of earth" (113), and although his reply offers the child a concrete means of comparison, his death—which is reported in the next paragraph and which, it is implied, resulted from heart disease—merely changes Jakob's question into the occasion for further metaphoric transformation: "His arteries silted up like an old river. The heart is a fistful of earth. *The heart is a lake . . .*" (117; Michaels' emphasis).

Michaels' insistence that the boundaries between reality and the metaphors she constructs to articulate this reality are invisible at best and non-existent at worst occasionally reaches near-absurd proportions. The section narrated by Ben and entitled "Phosphorus" opens with a discourse on lightning as a climatic condition from the eighteenth century onwards and culminates in the appearance of Petra, the woman who appears to him "as everything [he has] ever lost" (274). The movement from lightning as a real event to lightning as a metaphor presaging the moment when Ben falls in love as if, it is implied, he has been struck by lightning, feels contrived. Of course it doesn't help matters that Petra, in turn, transforms from conventional elegiac woman to ferocious fury who rampages through the house "like lightning" pillaging every room and inflicting damage with the destructiveness of the winds that rage outside (282).

At other times, however, Michaels' use of metaphor as a device of memory is unparalleled. In attempting to make sense of the unrepresentable horror of Auschwitz—a name that comes to represent both the actual death camp and, in our post-Holocaust world, a threshold space of anguished critical inquiry—Michaels represents memory as contamination, a fleshly laying on of hands from the dead to the living and back again. In a scene in which Jakob describes the prisoners of the SS who were forced to dig up the mass graves of the dead, he notes how the dead entered the living "through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and

hearts.” Memory is a parasite, a disease that is transmitted through the blood “into another generation” (52). In this sense, the status of the individual, whether s/he be witness, survivor, or reader, is always in question since the subject who writes (and who reads, who speaks and who listens) writes for a multitude of the dispossessed and the silenced, and this overdetermined subjectivity, whether doubled or divided, necessarily breaks down the barriers of the discrete subject.

Yet, in another instance of the conflation between the discourse of the testimony and the discourse of romance, Michaels later generalizes this notion of “skin memory” in her development of the romantic subplot. The grave-diggers who assimilate the cultural and individual memories of the corpses they disinter are no different in kind to Jakob at the moment that he falls in love and confesses himself another kind of memory bearer:

I cross over the boundary of skin into Michaela’s memories, into her childhood. On the dock when she is ten, the tips of her braids wet as paint brushes. Her cool brown back under a worn flannel shirt, washed so many times it’s as soft as the skin of earlobes. The smell of the cedar dock baking in the sun. (185)

A comparison of this excerpt with the earlier passage, both of which have been motivated by memory that is transported *via* skin, is grotesque and ironically it is this later passage that suffers in comparison. By insisting that both memories have been transmitted by identical acts of passionate empathy, the rotten flesh and blood-soaked hair the grave-diggers discover is implicated in Michaela’s lover’s “knowledge” of her wet braids and cool brown skin. Although the smell of cedar rather than decay haunts the later passage, Jakob’s memories, it is implied, are already infected. As a witness he is isolated by his blood-knowledge and everything he touches after is similarly contaminated.

It is possible, of course, that in employing the same trope of knowledge *via* skin in two extremely different passages—one that celebrates the lover’s “instinctive” knowledge of his beloved and the other that records the cultural imprinting of the dead upon the living—Michaels is guilty of sentimentality in a novel that fastidiously avoids this emotion in the context of the Holocaust. In suggesting this possibility my inclination to privilege one form of “skin knowledge” above another is apparent but is motivated by Michaels’ disappointingly clichéd construction of love transmitted through bodily memory.

Given her preoccupation with the poetry of love and catastrophe, it is significant that references to lack of metaphor in Michaels’ text signal a time of increasingly entropic impulses. As Jakob asserts, “the German language

annihilated metaphor, turning humans into objects [as] physicists turned matter into energy” (143). Interestingly, even when lamenting the demise of figurative language, Jakob is not immune to metaphor.¹⁰ At the same time he makes clear that the prevailing and unquestioned assumption of this narrative is inverted, and that the transition from “language to fact” (143), from denotation to detonation is but a small and insignificant (goose)step.

Yet, in *Fugitive Pieces* it is not only narrative that may be defined as “traumatic,” but language itself that undergoes trauma in the form of excessive imagery. One such trope is memory, which in Michaels’ text operates as a broken trajectory, an intangible but metaphorically disseminated figure that, while it cannot be grasped in what Jean-François Lyotard would call “the presenting present,” nevertheless refers back to this moment of presence by implication (59). Lyotard’s view that it is always either too soon or too late to grasp presentation (65), has particular resonance in the context of the traumatic event in general and in Michaels’ post-traumatic narrative in particular. In *Fugitive Pieces*, the young Jakob Beer experiences his past as essentially violent—at one point he writes of memories being “yanked” through his scalp (13). At the same time, he habitually experiences the past encrypted within the present:¹¹

I watched Athos reading at his desk in the evenings, and saw my mother sewing at the table, my father looking through the daily papers, Bella studying her music. Any given moment—no matter how casual, how ordinary—is poised, full of gaping life. (19)

Michaels’ concern with the given moment, with time as an ambiguous marker of the traumatic event, is figured in chapter titles such as “Vertical Time” and “The Gradual Instant,” and in the fraught events that comprise Jakob Beer’s memoir each moment opens into memory overlaid by remembrance.¹²

The post-Holocaust world, the world that has permitted the horror of Auschwitz and has gone on, despite Adorno’s caution, to “write poetry” in its wake, inevitably raises the spectre of remembrance lest we forget that forgetfulness is a guarantor of nothing so much as an immediate and vengeful return of the repressed. In this world, there is little so unbearable, so immediately punishable, as amnesia—a predicament that is neatly demonstrated in Athos’ story of his father’s failure to remember his family’s origins and the consequent decimation of that family.

In this anecdote Jakob repeats the story Athos tells about his own father’s lapse in memory, his “sin of neglecting the Roussos origins,” and his belief

that he is being punished for this omission by the deaths of his son and wife (26). In order to administer the corrective of memory to this narrative of family trauma, Athos' father returns to Zakynthos, the village where he was born, paves the town square and builds a public fountain to honour his son's memory. The idea of a return to origins is perpetuated throughout the novel: Jakob returns with Athos to Zakynthos like Athos' father before him; he also returns, in writing and memory, to the ghetto in which he grew up and later, towards the end of his narrative, to Idhra, the island where he first lived with Athos. At the end of the novel, Benjamin, Jakob's fictional son and the self-proclaimed heir to his story, undertakes this same journey to Idhra in the spirit of statue building that Athos' father first introduced and for much the same reasons—an oedipal dread that the sin of forgetting will lead to obliteration, the loss of his family through the neglect of their origins. The male characters in Michaels' novel compulsively return to the place of origins but their returns are never sufficient because in the journey something is always lost to translation, forgotten, erased, misrecognized or elided. What is this narrative aporia, this lapse of memory, this textual stammer that resists meaning?

In the case of Athos' father it is the town of Odessa where he lived for many years in ignorance of his family's origins in Zakynthos. But Odessa, for Jakob Beer, is not merely the wealthy merchant capital that it is for Roussos' maternal relations. For Jakob, Odessa is a touchstone of memory, the place to which he travels throughout his narrative by different routes. Not only is Odessa near the village where his father was born—thus providing the reader with a reworking of the theme of patrolinearity and genesis, this time transcribed in the minor key—but Odessa is also the place where, as Jakob reveals, “thirty thousand Jews were . . . doused with gasoline and burned alive” (26).

The flaming Jews of Odessa are repressed in Athos' father's account of the city in much the same way that the drowned Jews of Corfu are repressed in the history of the Roussos family shipping industry, which specialized in transporting valuable red dyes to Austria (of course, the symbolism of blood freight is never far behind such statements). What Athos learns from his father in this case, and what he later passes on to Jakob, is that “every river is a tongue of commerce, finding first geological then economic weakness and persuading itself into continents” (26). His father's interest in rivers as the medium for commercial trafficking, like Athos' absorption in

the geographical stratification of rivers, fails to take account of the Jews of Corfu who, shortly after, are rounded up and forced into a boat that sets sail for the open sea where we later learn that all have been deliberately drowned. In the first case the Jews of Odessa are burned, in the second the Jews of Corfu are drowned, and in both cases the apparent willingness with which a particular narrative is related conceals the corpses that seem to crowd at the margins of Michaels' novel. I am accusing Athos and his father neither of deliberate insensitivity nor of unconscious repression but instead I am attempting—in the context of a narrative wholly committed to the exigencies of memory—to point to the subtlety with which memory is inevitably elided even by the most articulate and reliable of witnesses.

In her introduction to the volume of essays entitled *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth asks how readers in the late twentieth century can have access to historical experience, more specifically, to “a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is no simple access” (6). Michaels responds to this historical “crisis” with what appears to be a parallel inquiry: how to articulate the trauma of history in language that is itself in crisis, language that is neither transparent nor opaque—since one would “see through” reality, the other obscure it—how to force language to signify on the extreme edge of signification in order to tell a story that is irreconcilable with words because unbearable. The predominant strategy employed by Michaels in her attempt to represent the obscene is the extended and highly intricate use of metaphor: the metaphor in this case positioned at the membrane of language and silence, memory and forgetfulness.

A particularly effective example of this metaphoric knot occurs in Ben's account of his provincial childhood in Southern Ontario as the son of Holocaust survivors. Although his parents are resolutely silent on the subject of their experiences, their silence is neither reassuring nor convincing, and much of Ben's childhood appears to consist of alternating attempts to persuade his mother to reveal the untellable story and to distract her from her past through childish deflections. One such deflection is his obsession with “twisters” and the “random precision of their malevolence” (224), which, like the vicissitudes of memory, it is implied, can strike at any time and with similarly dire consequences. Towards the end of his account Ben includes a revealing paragraph within which metaphors intertwine and collide:

Sometimes I read to my mother while she made dinner. I read to her about the effects of a Texan tornado, gathering up personal possessions until in the desert

it had collected mounds of apples, onions, jewellery, eyeglasses, clothing—"the camp." Enough smashed glass to cover seventeen football fields—"Kristallnacht." I read to her about lightning—"the sign of the Ess Ess, Ben, on their collars." (224-225)

In this extract, the chaotic effect of the tornado with its ability to distribute possessions and lives to the winds, is explicitly compared to the similarly disruptive effect of the armies of the Third Reich as they traversed the countryside gathering the dispossessed in camps and scattering the residue of their lives. Yet the effect of the tornado Ben reads about and which he relates to his mother is not merely a distant "bookish" event mediated by the act of reading and story-telling. On the contrary, a similar sense of chaos prevailed in his own childhood when the Humber river overflowed its banks and flooded the town in which he lived with his parents, sending its inhabitants scrambling for safety and effectively scattering their homes and possessions over the countryside in a re-enactment, first, of the Texan tornado, and second, of the successive acts of genocide that took place during the Holocaust. Indeed, Ben's section, "The Drowned City," opens with a description of the Humber river and its flood in 1954, evidence of which, he points out, can still be seen in present-day Ontario in the form of rotted books and photos, buried tables and dishes, and fragments of crockery that have settled in the river's sediment (202).

The effect of these fragments, the accumulated detritus of flood and tornado that spreads in the wake of Ben's narrative, is to privilege what remains of a city, a settlement, a home, after an act of violence has occurred that effectively destroys the community. What remains, Ben's narrative implies, is memory, memory fragmented by the effects of an "event"—to use Maurice Blanchot's term—but memory, nevertheless, in the form of revenants that are essentially indestructible as long as there is someone left to unearth the fragments, count the dead or, in Ben's case, someone to read (and write) the story. To return then to the domestic scene between Ben (the child of survivors and therefore the bearer of an unbearable burden of silence) and his mother (who is capable only of telling a necessarily incomplete narrative), it is significant that their transaction recapitulates the gaps and silences of partial narratives.

While Ben's account of the destructive tornado appeals to narrative closure, his mother's interjections in the form of direct speech are a coded account of the Holocaust she has witnessed generalized to encompass all

acts of nature, all frequencies of violence. Thus, when Ben reads to her “about lightning,” her reply refers explicitly to the double lightning bolts of the SS insignia. Yet her reply gestures even beyond this direct association of imagery: “‘the sign of the Ess Ess, Ben, on their collars’” (225). His mother’s reference to the SS is rendered on the page as “Ess Ess,” words that in Yiddish may be translated literally as “Eat Eat,” a misreading that unerringly refers back to Ben’s father’s exhortation that his son eat a rotten apple because to refuse food is an obscenity that cannot be borne in the wake of a past governed by hunger and privation. “Eat it . . . Eat it!” his father demands, ultimately forcing his son to swallow the rotten apple (218).

A complex system of textual slippage and narrative recall is at work, then, in the connection Ben’s mother makes between the lightning bolt insignia of the SS and the sign of hunger contained in the exhortation to “Eat Eat.” As Ben explains shortly after in his recollection of the trauma he suffers during this force-feeding, images are themselves signs of signs in the context of a system where nothing is what it appears to be, where all is correspondence, approximation: “Images brand you, burn the surrounding skin, leave their black mark” (218). We are returned, once again, *via* memory and metaphor, to the image of lightning, the flash of insight or inspiration that proves the world imaginary.¹³

The compulsive metaphorization of the world that Jakob, and later Ben, indulge in is, in many ways, a function of the narrative of trauma in which events are referential only to the extent that they are not fully perceived as they occur. In its attempt to transmit what Caruth calls “a truth bound up with its crisis as truth” (8), the traumatic narrative presents itself as an event in excess of our frame of reference, an impossible witnessing since the speaking subject is required to testify to a truth that necessarily escapes him/her insofar as it is a partial truth that is at once engendered and dispersed by the act of telling. The metaphor both conceals meaning and transforms it within the selfsame mechanism of comparison, a device that is so ubiquitous in *Fugitive Pieces* that it functions structurally. The traumatic event is related implicitly, since to narrate the event explicitly would be unbearable, would, in effect, replicate the catastrophe it seeks to domesticate through language.

In this densely poetic text metaphors proliferate but nowhere so compulsively as in figures of remembrance. Memory is seldom spoken of directly as a physiological function or an intellectual-emotional modality. Instead it is

ornately imagined as an act of human evolution, as when the “bog-boy” with whom the narrative opens surfaces into the streets of Biskupin, itself repeatedly described as a “drowned city” (5). Alternatively, memory is figured as an archeological moment, as when the same city, Biskupin, is “carefully excavated” for almost a decade (6). Jakob Beer, in his incarnation as the bog-boy of Biskupin, is rapidly compared to the Tollund Man, a form of primal life, a lost soul, a reborn child lucky enough to “emerge again in someone’s arms” (5), a perfectly restored corpse, an adventurer, an explorer, and finally, “the boy in the story, who digs a hole so deep he emerges on the other side of the world” (6).

These metaphors of death and rebirth, of excavation and evolution, are implicit corollaries to remembrance figured as successive acts of burial and retrieval. Yet it does not do justice to the text to confine the metaphors by which memory is constructed to these tropes. Memory is also an act of gestation, the moment when one body inhabits another either literally, as when Athos plucks the seven-year-old refugee, Jakob Beer, from out of his trousers (14), or figuratively, as when Jakob acknowledges his debt to Bella: “We were Russian dolls,” he recalls, describing how his sister inhabits his body as memory as he has himself lived inside the “body” of Athos during their flight from Biskupin.

Memory, in these pages, is essentially an embodied gesture, images that rise in the narrator “like bruises” (19), that alternately cause him to “peel from the ground like paper ungluing at its edges” or to sink into the forest floor “like a seal into wax” (8). Memory is the phantom limb of history, like the mother who feels the weight of her child in her arms even as she sees her daughter’s body on the sidewalk (138), but it is also the return of the ghostly dead to the bodies they have discarded in a series of successive hauntings that bridge the distance between figure and figment, between narrator and reader.

Even such intricate constructions of the figurative potential for remembrance fail to exhaust the metaphoric resonances of this text in which memory is both photographic imprint, a “ghostly double exposure” (18), and anamnesis, the taste of wine the narrator longs to cleanse from his mouth (22). Memory is the promise of literacy as in the Hebrew alphabet Athos coaxes Jakob to memorize (21), yet it is also amnesiac as in the English letters, “an alphabet without memory,” that Jakob gradually acquires (101). And, as Jakob learns, remembrance may be accreted in all things: in deposits

of limestone, “that crushed reef of memory, that living stone” (32), in fleeting shadows (213), upon the map of history where “perhaps the waterstain is memory” (137), and in a pantheistic vision of nature’s unerring ability to remember:

Trees, for example, carry the memory of rainfall. In their rings we read ancient weather—storms, sunlight, and temperatures, the growing seasons of centuries. A forest shares a history, which each tree remembers even after it has been felled. (211)

Michaels’ fascination with the metaphoric potential of memory—or metaphor as mnemonic device—bespeaks a preoccupation with textual depth that is pervasive in *Fugitive Pieces*. Like memory, the metaphor gestures toward the unseen, the invisible, to what is not available upon the surface of the text or within a superficial reading but which may be discerned upon careful excavation. Michaels’ highly poetic, densely figurative text requires us to read laterally as one would a lyric poem, in order to appreciate the array of images and allusions that proliferate. This “depth” reading, this insistence on a truth that is behind or beneath the image rather than the more conventional method of reading for plot or narrative is symptomatic of a text occupying the hybrid status of “poetic” novel. More to the point, the notion of depth as both metaphoric and literal marker is replicated in the text’s overwhelming insistence on acts of burial, drowning, excavation, and restoration.

The epigraph recalling those narratives of memory that have been “buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors” gives way to the opening chapter entitled “The Drowned City,” an account of the city of Biskupin, retrieved by the archeologists who have excavated her Stone and Iron Age relics. Of course, this city anticipates the second “Drowned City” of Ben’s account when the Humber river overflowed its banks and flooded the Southern Ontario town of Weston, implying that successive disappearances and retrievals are to be the lot of survivors even in this new country.

The bog-boy / Tollund Man who emerges in the opening pages as Jakob Beer the adult narrator is swiftly buried again behind the wallpaper in the cupboard from which precarious but suggestive position he witnesses the deaths of his parents and (fails to witness) the disappearance of his sister. From this point onwards, Jakob is buried and retrieved so often that in narrative terms he resembles a textual shuttle that appears at frequent intervals only to disappear with equal dispatch.¹⁴

Even the title of his first book of poetry, *Groundwork*, testifies to his obsession with the processes by which the earth may be turned over and examined for what it conceals, whether these remnants be bodies or metaphors, artifacts or images; and the reason for writing his present posthumous memoir arises from a similar preoccupation with what lies *beneath* the patina of circumstance. He describes himself, for example, sitting in late afternoon dimness as “a story eat[s] its way to the surface” (144). The story is buried in this figure, but gradually reveals itself in the process of story-telling. Later this idea will be expanded with Ben’s interest in biography as a process of retrieval and excavation, an archeological discipline that somehow yields up the subject of its inquiry—in this case the poet and translator, Jakob Beer—as whole, discrete, and perfectly preserved.

The story of the frequently resurrected Jakob Beer is set in the context of far greater burials. Throughout Europe during this time, Michaels’ narrator tells us, letters and photographs, treasured artifacts from Synagogue and home, books, and ghetto diaries are being buried (39). In turn, these objects and narratives buried in landscape are merely the precursors to an even more sinister sequence of burials and one that will lead inevitably to the mass graves of Europe. Those who escaped, we are told, did so by anticipating the graves, by burying themselves alive in baking stoves, sewers, garbage bins, in crawlspaces, crates, and closets. These examples of how history mirrors individual trauma are effective insofar as they characterize historical narrative as yet another cupboard door or spread of wallpaper behind which the young boy conceals himself, one ear pressed to the surface.

Besides being author of the present memoir Jakob is also, as mentioned, author of the volume of poems entitled *Groundwork*, the dedication to which reads:

My love for my family has grown for years in decay-fed soil, an unwashed root pulled suddenly from the ground. Bulbous as a beet, a huge eye under a lid of earth. Scoop out the eye, blind the earth. (206)

While recapitulating his preoccupation with what is buried and later retrieved, Jakob’s dedication provides an extended and strangely mixed metaphor for the process by which the writer can confront and articulate his past. Familial love is the root (the comparison is generative of ancestry, of nourishment, and of language in the sense of etymology) retrieved from burial while memory is characterized as a layering of “decay-fed soil,” a phrase that hints at the regenerative qualities of love that can grow and be fertilized even by decay.

The process by which the succulent root may be uncovered is the “groundwork” of the title and writing is characterized as a process of unearthing that at once reveals what is nourishing at the same time that it transforms the edible root into a terrifying visual organ, “a huge eye under a lid of earth.” The power of writing to uncover and transform is further intensified by the final directive to “scoop” out the eye and so “blind” the earth, a phrase that emphasizes the potential violence of the writing process figured as an exercise in memory retrieval and a corresponding and contradictory wish, presumably on the part of the writer, to “blind” himself, that is, to render himself amnesiac, unmemoried, to live a life unhampered by the pain of consciousness.¹⁵

The mature storyteller and poet, the writer who begins his writing life with a series of short story fragments on the theme of hiding (148, 157), spends much of his childhood trying in vain to disappear (18), to camouflage himself against woodgrain of floor or layers of earth (48), and ends by “dedicating” his writing to the vicissitudes and painful exigencies of memory. Since, for Jakob, writing begins as a posture assumed at the moment of trauma—the moment of the burst door and the ripped hinges—writing is always already pervaded by loss. He compares himself to a touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys “slightly in the wrong place,” or a poet writing every letter “askew” so that loss will “wreck the language, become the language” (111). This characteristic and repetitious stance of the child cowering behind the door provides the reader with the recognizable figure of the onlooker, the voyeur, the witness.

If *Fugitive Pieces* is, among other things, an extended meditation on the uses of metaphor and an experimental inquiry on the extent to which figurative language may trouble the borders between poetry and prose, what, finally, is the effect of this highly metaphoric discourse? In a narrative in which “everything” has been “retrieved from impossibility” (205), in a world in which identity pre-exists the individual in the form of racial categories, in the context of a society where one letter is enough to sentence the subject (like the letter “J” denoting Jew, which when stamped on a passport wields “the power of life or death” 207), language is potent only insofar as it escapes the boundaries of received meaning.

Michaels’ compulsion to interpret, translate, construct tropes and connect meanings, in short, her determination to force the apparently meaningless world of the Holocaust to signify in the course of these first- and

second-generation acts of witnessing is one possible answer to the monologic authoritarianism of the camps where no questioning of meaning was allowed. The problem of witnessing, of how to present the unrepresentable in writing is, in many ways, a problem of translation.¹⁶ Michaels' solution is to speak in a "foreign" language, to bring to the prose of the traumatic narrative the unruly compulsions of poetry, and in so doing to restore to language what Adorno once mourned as necessarily lost forever.

NOTES

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¹ In *Language and Silence*, George Steiner interprets Adorno's statement in the light of a pedagogical imperative: to read or to teach texts as if they were immune to recent history, he writes, constitutes a "subtle but corrosive illiteracy" (ix). For Steiner as for Adorno, the Holocaust gave the lie to culture as a humanizing force: "We come after. We know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day's work at Auschwitz in the morning" (ix).

Michaels takes up this argument by repeatedly mentioning German composers in her text: Mahler, Beethoven, Bach, Brahms and Schuman are cited as examples of dedicated musicians and, it is implied, of civilized Germans. Critic D.M.R. Bentley points out that Jakob Beer is himself named for the nineteenth-century German composer Giacomo Meyerbeer (7).

At the same time, neither Steiner, nor indeed Adorno, and certainly not Michaels is advocating a denial of art as a means of expression or consolation. As Adorno writes in *Negative Dialectics*, "It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" (312).

² Eli Wiesel has named the testimony as the chosen form of the twentieth century. In reply to the implicit question, what is the most ethical way of articulating or representing the information given to us by the Holocaust, Wiesel intuits a new genre: "If the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of the testimony" (9).

³ In his "Bremen Address" Celan is even more explicit about the ways in which language was corrupted during and after the Holocaust: "Within reach, close and not lost, there remained, in the midst of the losses, this one thing: language . . . But it had to pass through its own answerlessness, pass through a frightful falling mute" (quoted in Felstiner 23).

⁴ Jakob's sister's name is the pulse that impels the narrative, replacing, in the final pages of his memoir, image with sound, with the sound, as we have already learnt, that outlasts matter. "I grasped the two syllables closest to me, and replaced my heartbeat with your name" declares Jakob in the final words of his memoir (195), shortly—it is implied by the epigraph—before he is killed in a car accident, so that it is, finally, the pulse of the name that stands in the place of forgetting, of the erased face. This allegory of memory clumsily working itself out through sound in the absence of image, awkwardly recalling itself in an

alien medium, is appropriate to a discussion of traumatic narrative insofar as *Fugitive Pieces* presents itself as a novel that fumbles and stammers towards an impossible articulation.

Of course this last statement is challenged by the highly crafted language of the novel. The impossibility of representation continues to hover uneasily between the imperative to narrate the event in language that does justice to horror and the impossibility of narration when confronted by the full implications of this horror. At the same time, sound continues to be a privileged site in the years to come, not only of memory but of the ability to articulate memory. When the older Jakob Beer falls in love with Michaela he praises her responsiveness in words that transform her into an organ of receptivity: "She has heard everything—her heart an ear, her skin an ear" (182), and later his wish for his unborn child is that he or she may "never be deaf to love" (195). In addition, the idea of sound as a medium of insight is worked out in the many references to poets and poetry in the text, to musicians like Bach, Brahms, and Beethoven, as well as to the inordinate number of characters—Bella, Alex, Athos, Maurice's son, Ben's father—who play musical instruments.

5 Martin Buber in *The I and the Thou* is dismayed precisely by this apparent dis-alignment in the receptive model of witnessing in which, to use his pronouns, there is no longer an other to whom one can say "thou." This negates the hope of being heard or answered, or as Laub points out, even of being recognized as a subject ("Truth and Testimony" 66).

6 Felman suggests that the value to be assigned to witnessing as a textual event is that of the signature by means of which the outrages of erasure and annihilation may be reversed. As a "signed" text, Jakob's memoir is the means by which he can write himself back to his proper name from the anonymity of the opening pages when he was merely the bog-boy.

Such an enterprise, however, demands a state of constant vigilance. The impossible event is witnessed at the immediate "coordination of time and place" (162), precisely because a subject is present to testify. Jakob's last words attempt to articulate this precarious intersection of accident and intention:

The world goes on because someone's awake somewhere. If, by accident, a moment were to occur when everyone was asleep, the world would disappear. (194)

The Cartesian formulation of perception, wherein the world exists only within the subject's gaze as informed by his/her consciousness, resonates in this account of a people in imminent danger of extinction and who, it is implied, could be extinguished again were the gaze to waver. Michaels' narrative anxiety with regard to the burdens and responsibilities of storytelling as witnessing practice is foregrounded in the many characters she creates who are required to take on this role: Bella, Athos, and even Michaela, are compulsive storytellers while Naomi, who tells stories "like a courtier" (239), acts as a kind of domesticated Scheherazade to Ben.

7 The parallel between Jakob and Ben is one of the most obvious but by no means the only correspondence in the novel. Michaels' narrative is pervaded by similarities between characters that are, at times, overwhelming and confusing to the reader. Like Michaela, Ben is an exceptionally gifted child; like Jakob, Ben is a lonely only child who cannot form close relationships until he meets a beautiful and empathetic woman who "heals" him. Like Athos in his guise as archeologist and excavator of the town of Biskupin, Ben "scavenges" the banks of the Humber river collecting objects that have been buried in the spring floods (253). The similarities between Athos' library and study on the island of Zakynthos (28) and Jakob's study on Idhra (264) are emphatic and hardly accidental. It is

difficult to know what to make of these correspondences except to view them in the light of annotated similes by means of which characters are linked by a series of linguistic contrivances.

- 8 Like Jakob, Ben is a writer, a storyteller who undertakes the task of the second-generation witness which is to continue to force language to testify to atrocity from within the woundedness that transforms the incomprehensible, unrepresentable event into narrative. In this sense, survival is not necessarily the survival of an individual or even of a race but the survival of narrative, of story formed within the encounter between the survivor as writer and the listener as reader.
- 9 Roman Jakobson's distinction between metaphor and metonymy is useful here. The metaphor testifies to the capacity of two words to replace one another in a relationship of positional and semantic similarity. Metonymic tropes, on the other hand, combine and contrast positional similarity with semantic contiguity. In *Fugitive Pieces* Michaels uses both devices to evoke the unrepresentable nature of the obscene experience which is seldom written directly but rather replaced by metaphoric and metonymic signifiers.
- 10 This is certainly not an isolated case. Jakob frequently asserts his inability to metaphorize the world at the precise moment that his images blossom forth, so to speak, with the energy and renewed vigour of denial:

It's no metaphor to feel the influence of the dead in the world, just as it's no metaphor to hear the radiocarbon chronometer, the Geiger counter amplifying the faint breathing of rock, fifty thousand years old. (Like the faint thump from behind the womb wall.) (53)

- 11 I use the word "encrypted" to express my sense of this first-generation testimony in which the past exists within the present in a spatially indefinite and temporally indifferent melancholia. In this threshold place between remembrance and forgetting, memories converge and collide, since Michaels is not only attempting a history of one man's life but, more complexly, a history of the earth, of the mineral deposits of time.
Elizabeth Bellamy describes this "crypt-ic" melancholy as occupying "the obscure threshold between memory and forgetting" (22). Bellamy goes on to explain the genealogy of this word—encrypted—as originating in a psychoanalytic study by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their book *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*. For Abraham and Torok, the crypt is a reconfiguration of the Freudian unconscious as a tomb or vault inhabited by the subject's phantoms, whether these be family secrets, repressions, or revenants of a post-traumatic collective unconscious. Jacques Derrida's essay "Fors" is an extended meditation on Abraham and Torok's cryptonymy.
- 12 A particularly fine example of this technique occurs fairly early in the narrative when Athos and Jakob arrive in Athens to be welcomed by Daphne and Kostas. For a period of some ten pages (62-73) the direct speech of the friends is interspersed with Jakob's early memories of his family as if the congenial talk of the adults who are at last in a place of comparative safety is enough to lure the young child into the security that will allow his memories to unfold.
- 13 At the same time, the image of lightning that recurs in these pages anticipates the section entitled "Phosphorus" (273-86) when Ben recounts his encounter with Petra figured as a discourse of lightning in which lightning as a real event transforms into lightning as a metaphor for the moment of love and the effects of love gone awry in the form of an avenging woman.
- 14 Jakob begins by concealing himself from the Germans by digging his own grave, planting himself in the ground "like a turnip" (8), a burial in earth that is closely followed by a

similar burial in water when he walks out into the river until only his mouth and nose can be seen above the surface (11). Later, he emerges like a golem, the mythical creature of clay whose "birth" is precipitated by burial and retrieval. As a golem with "peat-clogged ears" (122) Jakob is rescued by Athos who has himself been excavating the buried city of Biskupin and who conceals the boy inside his coat where he is effectively "buried" until their arrival in Greece. Later, on the island of Zakynthos, where Jakob will one day bury Athos' ashes, the young boy hides from the possibility of unwelcome visitors in a sea chest, and each time he climbs out, he tells us, "less of me emerged" (31).

Still later, when Jakob and Athos have made their way to the "new world" and take up residence in Toronto, Jakob is fascinated by what he calls a "city of ravines" (89), a city that he persists in regarding as "sunken" and underground, where the wayfarer can disappear "beneath the streets, look[ing] up to the floating neighbourhoods" (89). He describes himself and Athos as "diving birds" plunging through many millions of years "into the dark deciduous silence of the ravines" (98). While the two walk through the ravines every Sunday, Jakob tries to "bury images" of loss and grief by "covering them over" with Greek and English words (93). The landscape they traverse during these walks conceals other landscapes so that the wilderness behind a neighbourhood billboard gives way to "the humid amphitheatre of a Mesozoic swamp," and the city's "sunken rooms of green sunlight" may be glimpsed from beneath a parking lot (98).

- 15 In addition, Annick Hillger points out that the passage evokes ideas of decay and contamination in relation to the passing of time. Hillger finds Kabbalistic resonances in the image of "a huge eye under a lid of earth," comparing this figure to the Lurianic myth of creation where the birth of self emanates from the earth conceived metaphorically as the ground of being (37).
- 16 I am reminded of another Holocaust narrative that engages with the act of translation as a means of "understanding" the experience of the camps. In a chapter entitled "The Canto of Ulysses" in Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz*, Levi presents us with the incongruous spectacle of two hungry prisoners discussing Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the one prisoner attempting to translate from the Italian for the other prisoner's benefit. In this way Levi presents us with a metaphor for the problem of speaking or writing about Auschwitz: in order to represent what is unrepresentable one is required to use a foreign language, in this case the "civilized" language of Dante. Levi's compulsion to interpret, translate, construct allegories and connect meanings, in other words to *force* the world to signify, is perhaps his answer to the authoritarian discourse of the camps where no questioning of meaning was allowed. I am indebted for this last insight to Dr. Susanna Egan of the University of British Columbia.

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