

“Afterbirth of Earth”

Messianic Materialism in Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*

Introduction

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida speaks of the importance of learning how to live with the dead (xviii). In describing the impossibility of deconstructing justice, he urges us to take responsibility for the past as present and to relate to the dead as living. As he points out, the return to the past itself is an impossible undertaking—elsewhere he speaks of its “infinite remove” (*Mémoires* 6)—but it has to be attempted nevertheless in order not only to do justice to those who have been silenced but also to redeem those who are still speaking. This moral imperative is espoused by Anne Michaels in her novel *Fugitive Pieces*, which articulates the need perpetually to address the genocide of the Jews during World War II: “It is your future you are remembering” (21), Jakob Beer, the novel’s protagonist, is told.

As a young boy, Jakob witnesses the murder of his family by German soldiers and is thereafter haunted by the ghosts of his parents and his sister, Bella. Hiding in the swamps immediately following the murder, he sees the sky “milky with new spirits” and realizes that “the dead are everywhere but the ground” (8). Even after he has been rescued and taken away from Poland, first to Greece and then to Canada, Jakob is tormented by nightmares. Sensing the presence of his “sister’s ghost” (125) everywhere, Jakob learns that “every moment is two moments” (140), that the past inhabits the present. Through the teachings of his mentor Athos, the Greek archeologist who has found and saved the boy during a dig, Jakob comes to realize that

he “is being offered a second history” (20). This paper examines the moral implications of this reconfiguration of time and, in particular, explores the notion of “a second history,” a history which keeps the past open in memory of the future, that is, a history which remains fugitive.

I.

“Every moment is two moments” (140); “it is your future you are remembering” (21). These invocations immediately call to mind Walter Benjamin’s conception of *Jetztzeit*, “the time of the now,” put forth in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (261-63): “[T]he present . . . , as a model of Messianic time, comprises the entire history of mankind in an enormous abridgment” (263).¹ Like his friend and contemporary, the marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, Benjamin writes within a specifically Jewish tradition of remembrance. Like Bloch, he revises the marxist dialectical conception of history by departing from a linear, continuous concept of time and introducing a notion of the present which brings the dialectics of historical materialism to a standstill.² While Marx’s emancipatory project is concerned with looking towards the future as delivering the fullness of liberation, Bloch insists that the present contains moments of *utopia*, and if it is blind to these moments it turns into a past containing our present as already lost. Hence the need to look backward, the need to examine those moments of having missed the *spirit of utopia* and to retrace “a possible future in the past” (“Zukunft” 294; my translation). In a similar fashion, Benjamin urges us to “fan . . . the spark of hope in the past” (“Theses” 257). He assigns this task to the historian who should be compelled by a responsibility to the dead, for “*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (257). Rather than conceiving of the historian as someone who merely gathers the facts about the past—as certain versions of historicism would have it—Benjamin envisages the historian as someone who finds traces of hope in the past in order to achieve a redemption of the present. Peter Szondi formulates the result beautifully when he speaks of “Benjamin’s search for a lost time, which is a search for a lost future” (90-91; my translation).³

II.

Using Benjamin’s concept of history, let us now take a closer look at *Fugitive Pieces*. I want to begin with a passage that contains in a nutshell the moral imperative of the novel:

It's Hebrew tradition that forefathers are referred to as "we," not "they." "When we were delivered from Egypt . . ." This encourages empathy and a responsibility to the past but, more important, it collapses time. The Jew is forever leaving Egypt. A good way to teach ethics. If moral choices are eternal, individual actions take on immense significance no matter how small: not for this life only. (159-160)

The passage evokes the Jewish tradition of remembrance and relates it to an ethics of living and communing with the dead and the lost. Rather than distancing themselves from the past by referring to the dead as "they," those who speak in the present are called upon to "collapse time" by using the communal pronoun "we," thus including what a linear conception of time would by definition exclude from the present. Like Benjamin, Michaels formulates an ethics that transgresses the mere *now* and she speaks of the "responsibility to the past" as a legacy handed down to the living by the dead. In practical terms, this ethics consists in telling and retelling the story of those who can no longer speak for themselves, for the past and the present are parts of an ongoing communal story and cannot be told once and for all. In his "Theses" Benjamin tells us that the nature of history and historiography is constantly threatened by the homogenizing forces of "conformism," and he reminds us: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to empower it" (255). It is thus the historian's task continuously to re-examine the past, for otherwise it turns into a monument celebrating the negation of difference. As Michaels puts it elsewhere, echoing Benjamin:

It's not the unknown past we're doomed to repeat, but the past we know. Every recorded event is a brick of potential, of precedent, thrown into the future. Eventually the idea will hit someone in the back of the head. This is the duplicity of history: an idea recorded will become an idea resurrected. (161)

As I have already indicated, it is Athos, Jakob's saviour and foster-parent, who figures as the teacher of history. It is certainly no coincidence that Athos is a geologist and archeologist, someone who digs the earth in order to find traces of the past. As a geologist, Athos investigates the "rock strata" (95) that have solidified over the course of time. In fact, the geological process of sedimentation serves as an image for the consolidation of history: "Human memory is encoded . . . in river sediment" (53)—an idea captured in the chapter heading "Vertical Time."

The novel begins by showing us how Athos participates in the excavation of Biskupin, the "Polish Pompeii" (104), a prehistoric dwelling found in the

late 1930s, which is Jakob's hiding-place. As a site of historical silencing and recuperation, Biskupin provides an adequate setting for Michaels' historiographic revisions, and it is only too appropriate that the novel should begin with a depiction of an archeologist digging in Biskupin and eventually finding a survivor of the genocide of the Jews. As we learn in the course of the novel, Biskupin was one of the sites where archeological findings had been deliberately misread by German archeologists for ideological reasons, namely in order to prove the supposed superiority of the German people. In fact, the Third Reich founded an institution called *Ahnenerbe* whose task it was to provide—by whatever means—scientific proof for the National Socialists' racial theories. In the acknowledgments Michaels refers to Gathercole's and Lowenthal's *The Politics of the Past*, a collection of essays dealing with deliberate distortions of the past, and it is here that we can read more about the *Ahnenerbe's* dubious methodology:

Himmler had no time for the pedantic precision of traditional science: he began not with hypotheses based on the evolution of evidence but rather with axioms for which the evidence had to be found; awkward or contradictory facts were ignored or altered. (79)

Clearly, the *Ahnenerbe's* aim was to impose one reading onto the past and silence other possible interpretations. In Michaels' words, "The job of Himmler's SS-Ahnenerbe—the Bureau of Ancestral Inheritance—was to conquer history" (104). Indeed, this is a perfect illustration of what Benjamin means when he writes that "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins" ("Theses" 257). Throughout his life Athos makes a point of setting right the distortions of historiography through the likes of Himmler's *Ahnenerbe*. He starts writing a book called *Bearing False Witness*, for to bear witness is a moral responsibility he feels towards those who either have not had the opportunity to speak or whose testimony has been erased. Be it the "inhabitants of Biskupin" or "the Laurentian People" (102) whose settlements he tries to find in Toronto, it is the silenced peoples of the past whom Athos commemorates in his book.

Interestingly, it is before he starts writing and bearing witness as a historiographer that Athos literally bears a witness to the past. On the archeological site of Biskupin he finds Jakob, and the way Michaels portrays Jakob's emergence from the bog calls to mind the birth of a child: in fact, the boy is described as the "afterbirth of earth" (5), which Athos rescues and preserves. The expression "*afterbirth of earth*" suggests that Jakob's history will come

to embody the “*second* history”(20) that Athos has set out to record (my emphasis). This history is the “history of matter”(119), a history about which little has been written. As Jakob tells us: “I was born into absence” (233).

Again, it is no coincidence that Athos is a Greek archeologist whose area of specialization is the preservation of wood. We recall that Athos has been called to Biskupin in order to help restore the prehistoric wooden structures of the dwelling. In an essay on the utopian element in materialism, Ernst Bloch tells us that the Greek word for “matter,” *hyle*, originally designated “wood,” and that for this reason one must speak of early Greek materialism as “hylozoist materialism” (“Utopische Funktion” 266; my translation). By presenting Athos as a Greek scientist who specializes in the preservation of wood, Michaels places him at the origins of materialist philosophy. By depicting him as a midwife to Jakob’s birth she relates him to the thought of Ernst Bloch for whom *utopia* is a child of matter, which may or may not be born: “Utopia is a function of matter. It is indeed a necessary part of matter, for matter is like a pregnant mother” (“Tagträume” 143; my translation).

While tracing the Greek lineage of Athos’ philosophy, Michaels at the same time evokes the Judaic tradition upon which her novel draws. The encounter between Jakob and Athos and their subsequent affiliation reflect the merging of two traditions of thought. In the very beginning of the text, Jakob, who is covered in mud and in clay, is referred to as “a golem” (12). The golem is a man-like creature made out of clay which has found its first formulation in Jewish mysticism, the teachings of which are known as the Kabbalah. Incidentally, both Jakob and Athos are familiar with the work of the Jewish mystics. Athos at one point speaks of the “linguistic investigations of the kabbalists” (100) and Jakob, the poet, refers to himself as “a kabbalist” (162) in his conception of language. Also, Walter Benjamin, whose ideas resonate throughout *Fugitive Pieces*, was familiar with the Kabbalah through his close friend Gershom Scholem, the renowned scholar of kabbalistic thought. As Scholem tells us, the figure of the golem spread into popular legends of the Middle Ages and eventually into works of modern literature. In the latter, the golem has come to symbolize “the unredeemed, unformed man; the Jewish people; the working class aspiring for its liberation” (*Kabbalah* 354). Although Michaels does not share with these earlier writers an immediate concern with the liberation of the working classes, these other meanings of the golem are of paramount importance in *Fugitive*

Pieces and Michaels is certainly making use of a shared symbol of modern writing in her depiction of Jakob. What is more revealing, though, is the way she delves into the golem's history when using the figure. Scholem points out that medieval philosophy used the word *golem* as a Hebrew term for "matter," for unformed *hyle* (*Kabbalah and Symbolism* 212). Thus it becomes obvious just how much Athos embodies the historical materialist: in Biskupin he retrieves the history of Jakob whose family and people have suffered from the "Nazi policy" of "anti-matter" (165).

Jakob himself tells us that it is in Athos' hands that he turns into an object of preservation: "Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood" (144). This is one instance of how Athos, the historical materialist, applies the methods of the natural sciences to the human sphere. Jakob states:

He often applied the geologic to the human, analyzing social change as he would a landscape; slow persuasion and catastrophe. Explosions, seizures, floods, glaciation. (119)

The analogy is explicit; images of geological rupture echo notions of social rupture. Moments of radical social change are like events that have radically altered the course of natural history. These events also take on an apocalyptic quality, and can be read in terms of *Heilsgeschichte*,⁴ an idea that Jakob expresses in the following observation: "Athos' backward glance gave me a backward hope. Redemption through cataclysm" (101).

It is probably here that Benjamin's messianic materialism is most explicitly voiced in the novel. Longing for redemption, Jakob's "backward hope" breathes the *spirit of utopia*. But looking backwards he sees a cataclysmic scene. Like Benjamin's "angel of history," Jakob sees a huge pile of debris and rubble giving testimony to the past as one large catastrophe:

[The angel of history] sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead and make whole what has been smashed. ("Theses" 259)

This passage from Benjamin resonates with ideas from Isaac Luria's creation myth. As Scholem tells us, in Luria's myth of redemption, history always embodies a state of brokenness, a state of non-redemption.⁵

Similarly, Lurianic ideas are reflected in *Fugitive Pieces*. The Lurian notion of the broken vessel is most obvious in the novel's title. *Fugitive Pieces* can be read as referring to the shattering of the vessel which has to be restored in the *Tikkun*. According to Luria who wrote in the sixteenth century, the

time after the Jews had been expelled from Spain, the exile of the Jews is connected with Adam's fall which induced "the scattering of the holy sparks . . . of the *Shekhinah*" (Scholem, *Kabbalah* 167). As God's chosen people the Jews are called upon to go into the world and gather the sparks which become more and more dispersed as time progresses. The exile of the Jews thus reflects the exile of the *Shekhinah*, and since the latter has to be restored from all its fragments, the condition of exile is a necessary step on the path to redemption. "In the course of its exile Israel must go everywhere, to every corner of the world, for everywhere a spark of the *Shekhinah* is waiting to be found, gathered, and restored by a religious act" (Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 116). Throughout the novel, Michaels alludes to various stages in the long history of Jewish exile: Egypt, Spain, Eastern Europe, North America. But it is in depicting the persecution of the Jews during the Third Reich, which induced an expulsion of unprecedented scale, that Michaels explicitly echoes the Lurianic idea of the broken vessel:

Jews were filling the corners and cracks of Europe, every available space. They buried themselves in strange graves, any space that would fit their bodies, absorbing more room than was allotted them in the world. (45)

Furthermore, we recall that Jakob, who through his name comes to embody Israel, had hidden in a crack in the wall while his family was being killed. At one point he also refers to his own "brokenness" and "the sorrow of those whose messiahs have made them leave so much behind" (169). As we shall see, Jakob himself will eventually salvage his people from the corruptions of history by assisting Athos as a chronicler of a "history of earth" (32).

If we take a closer look at Jakob's full name—Jakob Beer, we realize just how much he embodies the people of Israel. In fact, it is around his very name that the imagery of the novel revolves. Through his name Jakob's affiliation with a tradition of Jewish mysticism becomes obvious. In his book on symbolism in the Kabbalah, Scholem refers to Maimonides who had distinguished between several ways of reading the torah. *Be'ur* designates the torah's mystical sense. Through word play, the mystics associate *be'ur* with the Hebrew word for "well," *be'er*, for, to the mystics, the torah is like "a well of fresh water, whence spring ever new levels of hidden meaning" (60). While Jakob's last name thus expresses the fluidity and richness of the well and the mystics' reading of the torah, we immediately notice how contrary this idea of fluidity is to the condition in which we find him at the beginning of the novel: Jakob is hiding in the swamps of Biskupin, an area

that is bogging up, slowly sedimenting. It is an area that is anything but a well of fresh water. And considering what Himmler's *Ahnenerbe* is doing in Biskupin, it is anything but a place with endless meanings. Rather, the bog is a site where attempts are being made to solidify the past, to impose one reading on it: that of the victors of history, who are erecting monuments to themselves. The bog is silting up and turning into the "poisoned well" of history. The narrator notes: "History is the poisoned well, seeping into the groundwater" (161). The image of the well that is poisoned through of time parallels history as a process of decay. The image also reverberates with the accusation that Jews faced in the Middle Ages: Jews were said to poison wells and thus cause the Plague. The following centuries of branding the Jews as those who bring decay and disease to existing societies—a development that culminated in the pseudo-scientific racial theories of the Third Reich—bear testimony to the ways in which ideas perpetuate themselves over the course of time and are indeed, to use Benjamin's words, "empower[ed]" by "conformism" ("Theses" 255).

Just how paralyzing the idea of a monolithic monumental past can be to those who come later is best expressed by Ben, the young scientist whom we can in many ways read as Jakob's son, the son of Israel. A generation later, finding himself at an even greater remove from the past, Ben expresses what Anne Michaels herself must have felt as a young Jew looking back at the genocide 50 years ago: ". . . history only goes into remission, while it continues to grow until you're silted up and can't move" (242). Does justice forever belong to the realm of *utopia*?

III.

The fundamental paradox within which Athos, Jakob, Ben and, not least, Anne Michaels are caught in their dealings with history is only too obvious. It is the very paradox that Benjamin describes in his "Theses": How to progress while the weight of the past is holding you back; how to affirm what has been negated long ago. And yet, there seems to be a determination in the novel not to surrender to the paralysis, but to undo processes of sedimentation, to "stir up historia" (107).

Jakob displays this determination most strongly when he writes a book of poetry called *Groundwork*, a collection of poems dedicated to his family. Years after his traumatic childhood experience, Jakob attempts to come to terms with the haunting presence of the dead. *Groundwork*, the title of

Jakob's poetry collection, not only denotes Jakob's engaging in the past as a geological and archeological enterprise. It also signals the need to address the injustices of the past, rather than dismissing them as casualties of mankind gone beserk, so that the ground for a better future may be provided. This ground is only provisional but it is open to the possibilities of a future that is not bogged down by the weight of the past. As Ben observes, the poems that Jakob writes are "the poems of a man who feels, for the first time, a future" (267).

We recall that as a "bog-boy" (5) with his "boots locked in mud" (139), Jakob cannot live the flow of life. His marriage to Alex is overshadowed by the presence of his dead sister, Bella, who haunts Jakob "in her white dress" (125) and figures as his shadow-bride. Bella is the remnant of a past so crippling to Jakob that it is only in mourning, in acknowledging her loss, that he can eventually escape the "melancholia of bog" (233) and restore the fluidity and free flow of water that are inherent to his name. Jakob only realizes how liberating the experience of *Jetztzeit* is in his relationship with Michaela, his second wife: "This is where I become irrevocably unmoored. The river floods. I slip free the knot and float, suspended in the present" (188).

When reflecting on Jakob's writing, Ben voices most clearly what his namesake Walter Benjamin declares in his "Theses." Addressing Jakob Ben writes:

You were fortunate to be trained by a master. When you turned your attention to your own poems, in your *Groundwork*, and you recount the geology of the mass graves, it's as if we hear the earth speak. (209)

Like Walter Benjamin, whose "angel of history" is paramount witness to the injustices of "an oppressed past" ("Theses" 263), Ben expresses the need to enter the graves and listen to the unheard voices in order to foreclose the consolidation of a past told only by the victors of history.

In portraying Jakob as the author of *Groundwork* Michaels, in fact, envisions a historian who does not merely fathom the depths of historical knowledge, but who retrieves a "history of matter" (119) which has been obscured by idealist thought in the history of philosophy. She does so by using the powerful image of uprooting and freeing what has grown in the dark. We recall that at the very beginning of the novel Jakob had planted himself "like a turnip" (8) when he was hiding in the swamps of Biskupin.⁶ Here, Michaels alludes to "those Jews who ran off into the woods to hide in

ditches they dug for themselves and covered only with leaves and branches” (101), the account of which she read in Shoshana Kalisch’s collection of songs sung in the ghettos and concentration camps. The following stanza from a song called *In Kriuvka*, “In a Hideout,” expresses the speaker’s yearning to be free and to emerge into light from the dark, and we can well imagine it to have been sung by Jakob not only while he was hiding in the swamps of Biskupin but also at those moments of despair when he felt caught within “the melancholia of bog” (233), when he felt one with the living dead:

In a forest hide-out dark and deep,
My weary eyes close but I cannot sleep.
I sit and wait and brood, I cry bitterly.
Will we ever escape, again be free? (103-104)

Notably, the image that Michaels uses in her depiction of Jakob as a *kriuvka*, “a dugout,” is subsequently used by the poet Jakob himself. Years later, in describing his relationship to his family, Jakob writes:

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)

Not only does the passage evoke ideas of decay and contamination in relation to the passing of time. It also resonates with echoes from the Kabbalah. As Gershom Scholem tells us, *Ein-Sof*, the “Infinite,” which denotes the Absolute Essence before its manifestation in the different emanations (*Sefiroth*), is often “identified . . . through the kabbalistic use of neoplatonic idiom, with the ‘root of all roots’” (*Kabbalah* 89). In Lurianic doctrine primordial man (*Adam Kadmon*) is created as a recipient for the Divine light (*kad* is the Hebrew term for “vessel”), and it is from *Adam Kadmon* as the primordial being that all further creations emanate. Under the impact of the Divine light, however, Adam’s eyes burst and they refract and disperse the *Shekhinah*. When speaking of “a huge eye under a lid of earth” (206), Jakob thus takes up an image that is central in the Lurianic myth of creation: he renders the birth of self as an emanation from the ground of being. In line with Jakob’s project of exhuming a “second history” (20), “the history of matter” (119), the ground of being has turned literal.

At the same time, Jakob’s choice of words and images brings to mind a passage which describes history as a process of siltation and sedimentation: “Human memory is encoded in . . . river sediment. Eskers of ash wait to be scooped up, lives reconstituted” (53). Read alongside each other the two passages

illustrate how life cannot be conceived of without commemorating the dead, without “scoop[ing]” up the “ashes” that are contaminating the ground of being. Again, Lurianic thought is reflected: the scattering of the ashes, hitherto contained within the giant urn of earth, becomes the necessary precondition for the *Tikkun*, for “lives reconstituted” in fertile ground.

Jakob’s invocations of the *Adam Kadmon* of kabbalistic thought recall the description of him as a *golem* covered in mud and in clay. We already know that *golem* has come to stand for an imperfect being, for unformed matter, but in this context we note that the word at one point appears in the Bible as denoting Adam, the man made of clay (*adama* is Hebrew for “earth”) who does not yet breathe the spirit induced by God (Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 213). Moreover, ideas of the *golem* can be traced back to an old Jewish tradition according to which Adam is moved not by a “pneumatic spirit” induced from above but by the “telluric spirit of the earth” (216). As we read in Genesis 1,24: “Let the land produce living creatures. . . .” Just how much Michaels harks back to this tradition becomes obvious when she speaks of “the new Adam” (167) who must emerge from the earth after the genocide of the Jews (my emphasis).

In recurring to the figure of the new Adam, Michaels evokes the ideas of Terrence Des Pres whose influence she acknowledges in particular. In his book, *The Survivor: An Anatomy of Life in the Death Camps*, Des Pres tries to account for the paradox that despite the collapse of all values, the inmates of the camps were still driven by a will to survive and live in a world that had been emptied of what had hitherto defined culture and civilisation. Des Pres refers to Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power* to illustrate how mankind has always looked for a higher meaning outside of life itself. Bare existence has come to be subordinated to symbolic superstructures; within the framework of civilisation it has been relegated to a realm so low that it is often not even acknowledged as part of man anymore. In the course of analyzing the survivor’s accounts, Des Pres reaches the conclusion that “life is its own ground and purpose” (196), and similar to Michaels he assigns to the earth the function of propelling life. When Michaels writes that “we look for the spirit precisely in the place of greatest degradation” and that “[i]t’s from there that the new Adam must raise himself, must begin again” (167), she echoes Des Pres’ description of the survivor who embodies the telluric spirit of Adam: “His soul lives *in* his flesh, and what his body says is that the human spirit can sink this low, can bear this tor-

ment, can suffer defilement and fear and unspeakable hardship and still exist” (209; emphasis in original).

The examples that Des Pres gives to illustrate how survivors are compelled by this will to live in the most extreme situations are striking.⁷ However, in telling us how Dostoyevsky, who had been sentenced to death and taken to the place of execution, but was then released, arrived at the “awareness of life’s immanent value” (167), Des Pres does not restrict his insight to survivors of the camps. Michaels, too, refers to this episode in Dostoyevsky’s life. In *Fugitive Pieces*, it is Ben who imagines himself following Dostoyevsky to the place of execution and witnessing the condemned’s shock when their blindfolds are removed, when they learn that they are to live:

Never before have I seen faces to match those, with the bare revelation that still they live, that there has been no shot. I fall with the weight of life; that is, with the weight of Dostoyevsky’s life, which unfolds from that moment with the intensity of a man who begins again. (212)

Ben describes the revelation of “life’s immanent value” (Des Pres 167) as “fall[ing] with the weight of life.” In using the idea of falling down in order to convey Ben’s feelings at the moment of recognition Michaels captures what Des Pres calls the “experience of radical de-sublimation” through which the survivor comes “close to earth” (166). The idea of falling recurs at another point in the novel. When Athos tells us: “I can’t save a boy from a burning building . . . he must jump to earth” (45), this is a call to discard notions of a divine revelation from without and a call to fall back onto the ground of being itself.

A wonderful parable told by Athos illustrates how life is its own ground. As a young child Athos is taught by an old Jew about the “mystery of wood.” He tells Jakob about how the old man had told him about a ship that had sunk into oblivion and had re-surfaced after its cargo, salt, had dissolved: “Do you know what else the hamal told me, Jakob? ‘The great mystery of wood is not that it burns, but that it floats’” (28). Emptied of its content, devoid of meaning, the vessel surfaces. In the same way, Jakob “surface[s]” (5) from the bog after escaping the burning of his city and his people, a burning which can under no circumstances be read as a burnt offering, a sacrifice to a higher cause. The “great mystery of wood” is that it survives at times when ideological superstructures have failed to provide a ground for existence. It is an idea that is evoked again and again with “the mystery of wood” resonating as a *leitmotif* throughout the text.

IV.

Robert Alter, in a book on Benjamin, Scholem, and Kafka, situates these three writers between the two poles of tradition and modernity, and shows how the process of secularization in the modern world has affected the reading of the Jewish tradition upon which these writers draw. The book is called *Necessary Angel*, and it derives its title from a poem by Wallace Stevens, one of modernism's foremost representatives. It is no coincidence that Alter's book should bear the same title as Stevens' poetics, for in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* Stevens writes: "the great poems of heaven and hell have been written and the great poem of the earth remains to be written" (142). Clearly, Stevens thought of himself as the one to write "the great poem of the earth." However, I suggest that Michaels has written, certainly not "the great poem of the earth," for she would never claim the authorship of one *supreme fiction*, but a "poem of the earth" (my emphasis).

In writing her "poem of the earth," Michaels renews kabbalistic thought. She thus revises a cosmological model that has been emptied of its divine content and fills it with new meaning: the moral grounding for human action is the "afterbirth of earth," that is, living matter itself. Des Pres observes "[h]ow infinitely sad [it is] that Hegel's 'secularization of the spirit' reached its first fulfillment in the concentration camps" (208), and it seems that Michaels has attempted to alert us to the moment when the human spirit denies its biological reality. Like Des Pres, Michaels counters the negation of life by relocating the human spirit in the body. In one of the most moving passages of the novel, she describes how even in the gas-chambers the victims still express "the terrifying hope of human cells"; and when she speaks of the "[b]are automatic faith of the body" (168), this recalls Des Pres' description of the survivor whose "soul lives *in his flesh*." Michaels' example of Jakob jumping from a burning building—is it a church, is it a temple?—constitutes the moment of reverse sublimation as the only possibility for salvation left.

I quote the excerpt which Alter uses to preface his book, not only because it captures so much of what Anne Michaels has set out to do in *Fugitive Pieces*, but also because I believe that Jakob could very well have used it as a preface to *Groundwork*, his collection of poetry:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again.

Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing you hear its tragic drone

Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash; like meanings said
By repetitions of half-meanings.

Read against Stevens' poem, *Fugitive Pieces* can be seen as depicting the moment in history when earth's "tragic drone," which has remained unheard, erupts into the final effacement of meaning.

Conclusion

Like Benjamin, Anne Michaels uses the kabbalistic tradition to combine historical materialism with the concept of messianic time in order to lay to rest a marxist materialism indebted to the ideas of a homogeneous and linear time. At a time when all overarching ideological structures have collapsed, Michaels turns to the history of living matter and to the recovery of the "gradual instant" when "wood become[s] stone" (140), that is, when history closes in on itself. As Michaels observes: "History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral" (138). Like Benjamin, Michaels calls on us to "fan a spark of hope in the past" ("Theses" 257), a spark which we find enclosed in the "brick" (161) of history that will knock us out again and again if we allow it to consolidate into a single all-encompassing structure, if we accept it unexamined.

I want to end with a short reflection on angels: In the Bible, Jakob wrestles with the angel at the river Jabbok (*Genesis* 32,22), the place where the living cross over to the realm of the dead (Scholem, *Kabbalah and Symbolism* 135). In *Fugitive Pieces* a new Jakob encounters the "Angelus Novus" who no longer carries a message of God, who "no longer sings any hymns" (Scholem, *Angel* 233). Jakob Beer's encounter with the "angel of history" takes place on the shores of a receding river, for history has come to a standstill. Witnessing how the spirits of his dead parents fly up toward an empty sky, Jakob is wrestling with the absence of angels. Ultimately, this absence is the lesson that Athos teaches Jakob. "How do we know there is a God?" Athos tells Jakob, "Because he keeps disappearing" (107).

NOTES

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the ethics of historical relation. I also wish to acknowledge the assistance of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) during the writing of this paper.

- 1 More often than not the “Theses on the Philosophy of History” remain rather impenetrable. A look at a passage in Benjamin’s *Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert*, his reflections on a childhood in Berlin, provides a more accessible point of entry into his philosophy of history. The passage illustrates the call of conscience to transcend the mere *now*: the little boy, Walter, is told about a relative’s death. The boy is in his room, lying in his bed, about to fall asleep, while his father is giving a detailed account of how his cousin died. Sensing that his father’s rendering of the story is somehow incomplete, the boy decides always to remember the room, always to remember the bed: “the way you remember a place which you know that one day you would have to reenter in order to retrieve something that has been forgotten” (47; my translation). In fact, years later, the boy finds out about the cause of the cousin’s death: “In this room my father had kept silent about one detail in the story. Namely, that the cousin had died of syphilis” (47; my translation). The room in Benjamin’s story is described as a place where past, present and future do not follow one another in temporal sequence but are presented as one in a momentary conjunction: “you remember a place which you know that one day you would have to reenter in order to retrieve something that has been forgotten” (47; my translation). The boy senses, without knowing for sure, that his father is not telling the truth, and thus he feels the need to remember the room and the bed as the places where he caught a glimpse of a revelation to come, as places where the truth about the past will have been stored, although *in absentia*. Significantly, these places are the very places where the unknown and the dead traditionally haunt the living: you are in bed, dreaming at night, when the unconscious works on you; you are in your room, at home, when the visitations of ghosts turn your most intimate place into the “uncanny” (*das Unheimliche*) itself (Freud 379).

The way Benjamin describes the boy’s experience is highly reminiscent of the aesthetics of *Vor-Schein* formulated by Ernst Bloch. In his aesthetics, Bloch advances the notion of *Vor-Schein*, “anticipatory illumination,” to describe what art enables us to do: namely, to catch a momentary glimpse of *utopia*, the place that is no-place, the place of truth (*Utopian Function* 141).

- 2 In the “Theses” Benjamin writes: “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop” (264).
- 3 In a letter to Benjamin, Max Horkheimer most explicitly voices his discontent with this kind of aberration from historical materialism: “The concept of incompleteness is idealistic, as long as completion has not been included in the concept. The injustices of the past happened and are behind us” (Tiedemann 106; my translation). Horkheimer’s thoughts strongly echo Marx’s in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “The revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead, for thus only can it discover its own true meaning” (26). Whereas Marx would have the living tread upon the graves of the dead in order to walk towards liberation and thus forsake the superstitious act of conjuring the dead, Benjamin wants us to enter the graves and commune with the dead in order to

seek redemption there. Unless we do so, the graves will continue to grow into the insurmountable tomb that Benjamin's "angel of history" ("Theses" 259) witnesses: a tomb that is forever blocking the entrance to paradise, forever negating Bloch's *spirit of utopia*.

4 *Heilsgeschichte*: the interpretation of history stressing God's saving grace.

5 To Scholem, in fact, the passage combines two motifs with which Benjamin was very familiar: one from Christian baroque thought and another from Jewish mysticism, both of which represent what Scholem terms a "melancholy gaze at the past of history" (*Angel* 233). In baroque allegory, history is viewed not as a process of giving shape to eternal life but as "a process of incessant decay" (*Angel* 233). Similarly, the kabbalistic notion of *Tikkun* presents a view of historical progress as an impediment to redemption. As Scholem explains elsewhere (*Kabbalah* 128-44), Lurianic doctrine distinguishes three phases of creation: *Zimzum*, *Shevirah*, and *Tikkun*. In *Zimzum*, God, the Divine Essence, contracts Himself and makes room for the creation of other beings. Thus it is through God's withdrawal from primordial space into His own being that the world is paradoxically created. In *Shevirah*, God returns to the world: Divine light floods into the vessels, the forms that are to give shelter to the emanations of God. But the light is too strong: the vessels break, and the *Shekhinah*, God's presence in the world, is propelled into exile. Finally, *Tikkun* denotes the restitution of the vessels, a restitution which can only be fully brought about by the messiah and the arrival of messianic time. In this sense, Scholem speaks of history's essentially fragmentary character.

6 Jakob is referred to as "Tollund Man, Grauballe Man" (5) at the very beginning of the novel. Thus, Michaels evokes the poetry of Seamus Heaney, the Irish poet who employs the image of the bog in relation to a past long deemed lost. Heaney's poems are populated with turf-cutters and bog-people, the preserved bodies of those who are released from the moors centuries after they have died. Resisting decay, these bodies bear witness to the unnatural circumstances of their respective deaths: Tollund Man died hanging, while Grauballe Man had his throat cut.

In *Fugitive Pieces*, the echoes of Heaney are strong, and they serve to underline Michaels' presentation of history as a process of siltation and sedimentation. There is Athos who figures as the turf-cutter in *Fugitive Pieces*: "digging" (5) through the layers of history he resembles the speaker in Heaney's poem "Digging" for whom the act of writing about his forefathers is very much an act of unearthing their past. Cutting up what has become solid with time, Athos provides Jakob with a "Vinland peathouse" (29) to protect the boy so that he himself may eventually restore the fluidity inherent to his name. There is Ben who as a child makes friends with "an Irish boy and a Dane," reads about bog-people and "derive[s] a fascinating comfort from their preservation" (221). Like Heaney's Grauballe Man who "lies on a pillow of turf" (69), Ben draws "the peaceful spongy blanket of peat" (221) over his shoulder and thus expresses a sense of feeling at rest knowing that traces of the past do emerge at times most unexpected. Finally, there is Jakob, "bog-boy" (5), who also finds protection in the bog when he hides in the swamps of Biskupin after his family has been murdered. But to Jakob, the bog eventually turns into something very threatening.

7 For example, see Nadezhda Mandelstam's account: "Our way of life kept us firmly rooted

to the ground, and was not conducive to the search for transcendental truths. Whenever I talked of suicide, M. used to say: 'Why hurry? The end is the same everywhere, and here they even hasten it for you.' Death was so much more real, so much simpler than life, that we all involuntarily tried to prolong our earthly existence, even if only for a brief moment. . . . Perhaps it is better to talk in more concrete terms of the fullness or intensity of existence, and in this sense there may have been something more deeply satisfying in our desperate clinging to life than in what people generally strive for." And David Rousset's account: "Dynamic awareness of the strength and beauty of the sheer fact of living, in itself, brutal, entirely stripped of all superstructures—living even through the worst cataclysms and most disastrous setbacks" (Des Pres 166- 67).

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