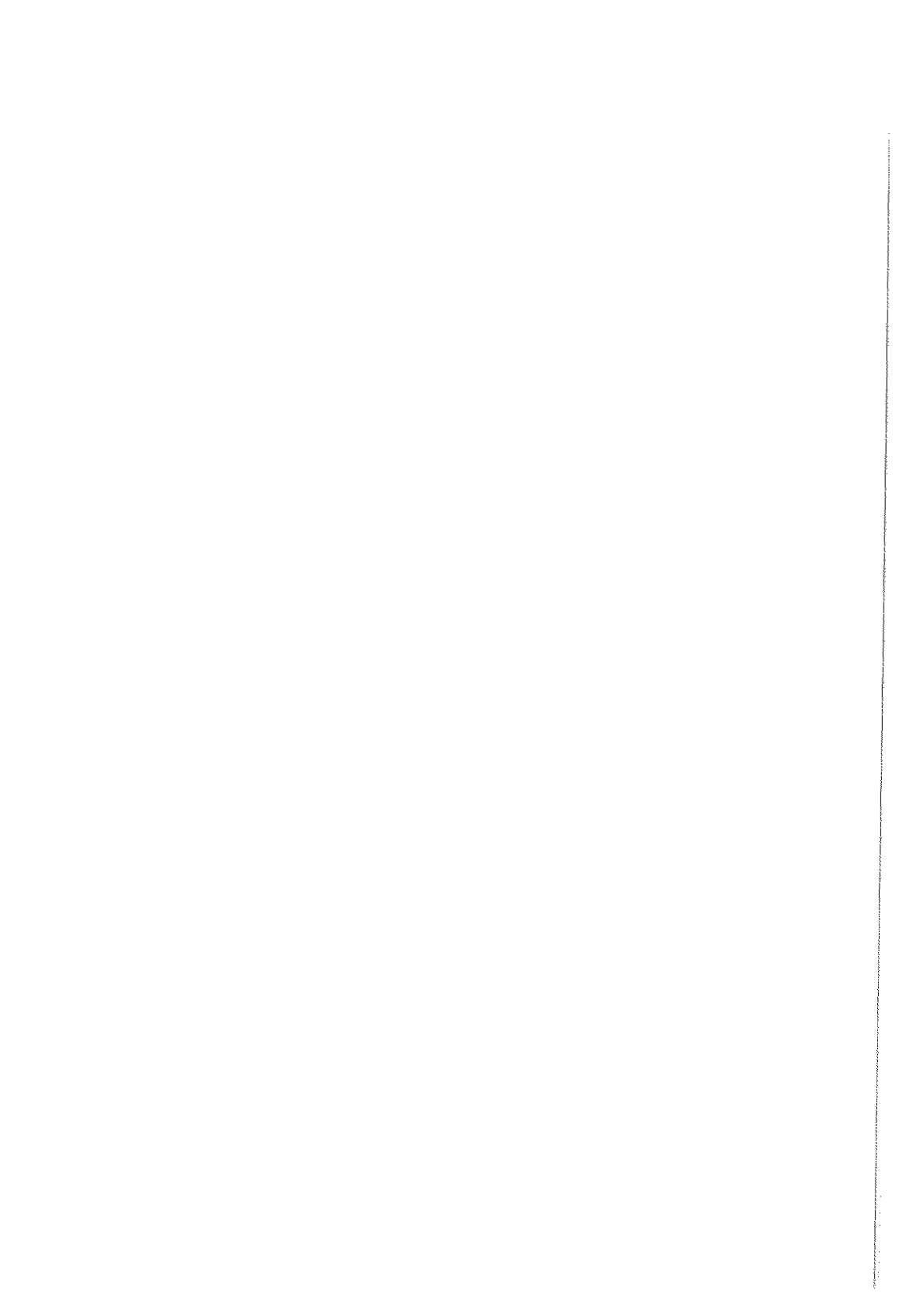


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**‘LANGUAGE REMEMBERS’:
THE POETRY OF ANNE MICHAELS**

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'LANGUAGE REMEMBERS': THE POETRY OF ANNE MICHAELS

Anne Michaels alcanzó popularidad mundial con su novela *Fugitive Pieces*. Sin embargo, Michael ya había editado previamente dos libros de poesía de calidad notoria (*The Weight of Oranges* y *Miner's Pond*). Este artículo explora dicha poesía comparándola con algunas tendencias de la literatura canadiense de nuestro siglo.

Anne Michaels achieved a worldwide recognition with her novel *Fugitive Pieces*. However, Michaels had previously published two poetry collections of notorious quality (*The Weight of Oranges* and *Miner's Pond*). This paper explores that poetry, comparing it with some Canadian literary trends of our century.

Anne Michaels is a Canadian writer already well-known. Her novel *Fugitive Pieces* won the Chapter Book in *Canada First Novel Award* and the *British Orange Prize* for fiction. A novel which has been translated into several languages, among them Spanish. In the case of Michaels we find, however, one further example of a writer who has obtained a wide recognition only after publishing a work of fiction, since she had previously produced two poetry collections as well. It is precisely for this reason that I would like to propose in this paper a humble but energetic revision of her poetry.

As a mere biographical note we can begin mentioning that Michaels was born in 1958 in Toronto from Jewish parents. She studied at the University of Toronto, teaching 'creative writing' in that same institution years after her graduation. Apart from her novel, she has published –as I said before– two poetry collections entitled *The Weight of Oranges* (1986) and *Miner's Pond* (1991). Both of them have been recently reissued in one single volume thanks

to the success of her novel. Yet these two books were awarded with the *Canadian Authors Association Award* and shortlisted for the *Governor General's Award* and the *Trillium Award*. As you can see, although Michael's production is still in its beginnings, it is highly promising.

Up to the moment nothing or very few has been said about her poetry, with the exception of several reviews and a bright commentary by Sam Solecki for the *Cambridge Companion to Canadian Literature*. All reviewers have agreed that Michaels is a talented poetry writer. Rhea Tregebov, for example, affirms that in Michaels' poems intelligence is equally weighted with emotion¹. Michael Ondaatje, on his part, has written that: "these are poems that go beyond games or fashion or politics...they represent the human being entire". No doubt, Michaels is a good poet who is able to write not only about important matters of life –history, family or love– but also about the most trivial incidents of our daily routine. In 'Fresh mint', for example, Michaels explores the subtle sensations caused by a smell. To our surprise, the moment gains an unusual importance once it is described in its brief succession and temporality by means of provocative language:

Fresh mint slinks towards us through the dark kitchen,
crowds the table,
loud from its own good suggestions.

Persuasive as an extra electron, it changes
conversation, reminds us of
something. Insidious.
The way there's always
more glasses than guests at the end of a meal.

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the *III Seminario de Estudios Canadienses en Córdoba* with the title 'Unsubdued Lyricism: Exploring Anne Michaels' Poetry' . Universidad de Córdoba. 27-28 April, 1998. I would like to thank Sam Solecki for taking the time to discuss this topic with me, and for his comments and criticisms of an earlier draft of this essay.

R. Tregebov, ['*Miners' Pond*. Review']. *University of Toronto Quarterly*, no. 62:1 (1992): 68-9. We should remember at this point Michaels' words in an interview by Eva Tihanyi:

A. M.: [...] And that's where music has a great power, because it enters your body, enters your nervous system, without mediation. It enters your brain, enters your memories —

ET: Is that what you want your words to do for the reader?

A.M.: Yes, that would be a fair analogy. The challenge of language and the challenge of making and intellectual idea, an image, carry emotional weight is something I find hard to resist.

In 'How to give poetic prose a good name' (Interview). *Books in Canada*, no. 25:9 (1996): 6-8.

It binds us in its loose weave,
tread of moonlight in water.

Soon we don't notice
the wild smell,
being so filled with it (p. 85)

THE WEIGHT OF ORANGES

The poems of this collection fall roughly into two main groups: the elegies and the love poems. The elegies, in turn, can be also classified in what I will call 'genetic elegies' and 'individual elegies'. Genetic elegies are not dedicated or addressed to a particular person: they are, somehow, lyrical reflections on the human mortal condition, the past and the role that the dead and the ancestors play in our daily lives. This background also animates her novel *Fugitive Pieces* which begins with this powerful and epigrammatic sentence: "Time is a blind guide", to follow: "no one is born just one". The two most interesting poems in this group are, in my opinion, 'Lake of Two Rives' and 'Memoriam'. These are two pieces of poetry whose messages seem to be that we are like the earth, burdened with our own past: "We do not descend, but rise from our histories/If cut open, memory would resemble/a cross-section of the earth's core(a table of geographical time" (p. 8). These poems display the same concern as those of the 'Ubi sunt', yet Michaels provides us with an answer. They –the dead– are in us: in our bodies, in our memories: "memory insists with its sea voice,/muttering from its bone cave./Memory wraps us/like the shell wraps the sea" (p. 21).

Apart from these poems, as I previously pointed out, we find a series of elegies written on the memory of a particular person: these poems are 'Anne', 'A Height of Years', 'Near Ashdod' and 'Pushed to the Dark'. The grief is here more specific in the sense of being less philosophical and abstract: "We recognize death and love when we can start calling them names. Each other's". As for the love poems, we can say that many of them deal with the motif of the separation of the lovers, displaying an evident nostalgic mood. Among them, I would highlight the poem 'Words for the Body', a composition in which the protagonist reviews and celebrates a life together with the loved person since the very childhood. Here, again, memory stands out as the central piece of the poem:

To praise memory is to praise the body.

And I find myself describing
the joining of hips and eyes,
the harbours of thighs and lips,
as the singing of two small bodies in a dark ravine,
as two small bodies
holding up the night sky in a winter field (p. 48)

In general, the whole book is distinguished by a nostalgic and melancholic mood. The same imagery is oriented to support this tonality. Therefore, the presence of solitary landscapes, the several references to dawn, rain and winter. As a matter of fact, these poems are better defined by what is missing in them –for example: changes of tone, ironical turns, sarcasm or unexpected changes of perspective. To avoid the monotony that inevitably arises from this permanent tone –a feature which is one of the main dangers of her writing– Michaels inserts, from time to time, witty and epigrammatic sentences in her poems: “The longer you look at a thing/ the more it transforms” (p. 7); “We recognize death and love when we can start calling them names” (17). In most of these cases the structure of the sentence follows the pattern A → (is) B :

“Every house is a storehouse” (19).

“The only experience unchanged by recollection/is horror” (31)

“To praise memory is to praise the body” (48).

“Memory is cumulative selection” (59).

“Our blood is time” (60).

“Every painting is a way of saying good-bye” (82).

“The river is a loose tongue,/ a folk song” (109)

We should also notice the permanent presence in this poetry of imagery related with light. Michaels feels a special interest in capturing light with precision and care, as many descriptions, allusions and complementations show: “light limited, light specific,/light like a name” (p. 6); “He watched to remember/in the embalming moonlight” (6); “After supper the street turns molten/under the yellow pollen of moonlight” (19); “Your face white/in the womb light” (26); “send me some of your Italian light” (29); ...on the aquarium light of birches” (43); “market stalls emptied/of their solid light (83). Michaels’ fondness of painting lies behind this obsession with light. Both painting and light may sometimes appear explicitly related, as for

example in "The Day of Jack Chambers" or in "Modersohn - Becker". In other instances, the connection is not made explicit, yet the writer carefully studies the different effects the light has over the bodies, just as a painter would do:

WOMEN ON A BEACH

Light chooses white sails, the bellies of gulls.

Far away in a boat, someone wears a red shirt,
a tiny stab in the pale sky.

Your three bodies form a curving shoreline,
pink and brown sweaters, bare legs.

The beach glows grainy under the sun's copper pressure,
air the colour of tangerines.

One of you is sleeping, the wind's finger
on your cheek like a tendril of hair.

Night exhales its long held breath.
Stars punctuate through.

At dusk you are a small soft heap, a kind of moss.
In the moonlight, a boulder of women.

Michaels frequently measures time through the changes in light. Some of her poems develop a temporal structure that goes from night to day (see "Depth of field"). Not only the presence of light, but the lack of it, is something to take into account when approaching many of these poems, especially because the night is considered by Michaels as the appropriate moment to remember those people who left us. This is the case of the "Lake of two rivers", "Words for the body" or "Memoriam", which begins:

In lawnchairs under stars. On the dock
at midnight, anchored by winter clothes,
we lean back to read the sky. Your face white
in the womb light, the lake's electric skin (p. 20)

I will end this section by evaluating Michaels' book as a good 'opera prima'. Her style may be intimate and sentimental but, in no way, poor or weak. Its richness springs mainly from: 1st) suggestive descriptions, 2nd) ingenious images and metaphors; and 3rd) elegant and intimate cadences. I agree with Sam Solecki when he says that these poems are not rightly autobiographical. However, Michael's has created a very coherent voice nearly consubstantial with the poet, and thus our permanent temptation to identify one voice with the other –that is, the lyrical subject with the poet.

All this said, we must notice, however, a single exception in the poem 'January' which is written as a kind dramatic monologue in the voice of the Flemish painter Pieter Brueghel. It may be a complete act of foolishness to look through the museums around the world for the famous picture of Browning's poem 'My last Duchess'. This is not the case with Michaels' 'January' for, in fact, she has poeticised about a real painting by Brueghel painting entitled, precisely, 'January'. This painting has also seduced other poets such as William Carlos Williams – who wrote the poem 'The Hunters in the snow' in his book *Pictures from Brueghel* – and John Berryman who wrote a poem entitled 'Winter Landscape' also based on this picture. Contrary to these authors, Michaels uses the picture as an excuse to fictionalise about the feelings and psychological tensions of the painter.

The poem is well documented and tries to follow the fashion of the documentary Canadian poem cultivated by Ondaatje, Atwood or Gwendolyn McEwen, among others. As in a good dramatic monologue Michaels' poem also presents us with a character who is suffering from a personal conflict. In this particular case, we face the nostalgic mood experimented by Brueghel who misses the company of his friend, the Italian miniaturist Giulio Clovio²:

-
2. "Bruegel's stay in Rome in 1553 is also confirmed in a rather unexpected way. We know from the inventory of his estate that Giulio Clovio, the celebrated miniaturist, owned a number of paintings and drawings by Bruegel. Among them was one which is described in the inventory as a miniature painted by Clovio in collaboration with Bruegel: '*Un quadretto di miniatura la metà fatto per mano sua et altra da M^oPietro Brugole*'. We learn from this inventory entry that the renowned miniaturist who was in high esteem by the great Italian patrons of his day and whom Vasari calls 'un piccolo e nuovo Michelangelo', a man who was by some thirty years Bruegel's senior, collaborated with the unknown young Flemish. Clovio had left Rome in 1551 to return only in 1553 and to remain the period ascertained for Bruegel's stay in Rome the two men must have been very close. Not only do we have the evidence of their direct collaboration, but also, according to the inventory, Bruegel painted a little picture of the Tower of Babel on ivory, which, as the necessarily small size of the material suggests, was a miniature, a type of work inspired by Clovio. Unfortunately none of Bruegel's paintings from Clovio's collection has come to light so far". From: F. Grossmann, *Bruegel. The Paintings. Complete Edition*, London: Phaidon P., 1973, p. 16. See also: W. Gibson, *Bruegel*, N.Y.:

I painted all day and at night
I walked back to the place and looked down on the houses,
lamplight connecting the trees like fabric.
Standing in the damp breath of the forest
I looked in your direction.

Are you on your balcony now?
Tomorrow morning Carel will come for this letter.
Each day he travels I'll look south.

Send me some of your Italian light,
even if it's not mine, I still miss it.
Send me the kind we labelled "before dinner, June"
or "dawn, the day Pieter Brueghel left for home" (p. 29)

[See Appendix]

Michaels has deeply researched the historical data, something which obliges us, in turn, to do the same if we want to fully understand the many references in this poem. Still, this careful documentation has not prevented Michaels from fictionalising the facts whenever she feels it necessary.

MINER'S POND

'January' anticipates an important aesthetic change that Michaels will experiment in her following book of poems *Miner's Pond*. In this collection, the poetess clearly fights to mitigate the lyrical subjectivity of her previous book, opening her discourse to other voices. In view of this, it is not surprising that most of these poems are dramatic monologues or soliloquies rendered by a historical character, such as the German writer Alfred Döblin, the astronomer John Kepler or the French painter Renoir.

O.U.P., 1977 and C. Van Mander, *Dutch and Flemish Painters*, N.Y.: McFarlane, Warde, 1936. Michaels has probably borrowed from this last book -the first biographical sketch of the painter- the idea for the following words, somewhat fictionalized: "When Martin came to see me/he laughed until he looked drunk/and shouted, "Well I know you swallowed the Alps,/but must you spit them out again?". Now everyone in Antwerp repeats the joke" (p. 28) ["*Pieter painted many pictures from life on his journey, so that it was said of him, that he visited the Alps, he had swallowed all the mountains and cliffs, and, upon coming home, he had spit them upon his canvass and panels, so remarkably was he able to follow these and others works of nature*", Mander, C. *Op. cit.*, p. 153]

Up to this point, I have mentioned 'documentary poems'. This must not lead us to think these poems are similar to, for example, Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*. Let us make a note of some differences. In first place, I cannot see real irony in Michaels' writing. It is true that we can consider the documentary collage as an ironic genre in itself, as professor Livesay has rightly pointed out: an irony that emerges from the dialectics between the historical subject— meaning the document— and the subjectivity of the poet³. However, it is clear, at least for me, that Michaels' does not work here ironically. Secondly, the poetess is not interested in questioning the identity of the lyrical subject: we do not have in these poems what Kroetsch calls 'an emptying of the subject'⁴; rather, we find Michaels working on a received identity and fictionalising over that hidden history which is usually banished from books and documents, that is to say, the history of intimacy, of feelings and profound thoughts. Apart from this, Michaels always works keeping an internal coherence of the documents she deals with. This prevents her from creating a 'documentary collage' since the sources are integrated in a coherent whole, not clashing among each other⁵.

The poems are kept within an overt single voice —that of the historical character— trying to avoid in this way the famous 'heteroglossia'. On the other hand, they are not very long in order to prevent an excessive weight of narration and to favour, in this way, the lyricism in these lines. Besides, they tend towards a final *closure* and it is for this reason that we do not find unexpected changes of tone or ironic turns. Nor are these poems an exercise of metaliterature. Protagonism falls in this case on the characters, on their feelings and not on the document in itself as in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* where textuality is foregrounded. Finally, I am unable to perceive even a kind of detachment that Ondaatje develops in his documentary poems. Rather, she feels an unconfessed admiration for these characters, most of them having suffered from exile, sorrow or solitude.

3 Vid., 'The Documentary Poem: A Canadian Genre' in *Contexts of Canadian Criticism*, ed. Eli Mandel. Chicago: The U. C. Press, 1971, pp. 262-81. See also: S. Scobie, *Signature Event Context*, Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1984, pp. 119-127.

4 "Robert Kroetsch in conversation, 13th. Oct. 1985: his point was that the notion of the Freudian self that ruled over much modern poetics (and, I would argue, the criticism that emerges from them) is obsolete. He suggested that what we find in a long poem like *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* is an emptying of the traditional monologic self so that inconsistencies are allowed their full place" [taken from: D. Barbour, *Michael Ondaatje*, N.Y.: Twayne Publishers, 1993, c. 3, n. 19, p. 22].

5 On the notion of 'documentary-collage' see, among others: M. Jones, *The Art of Difference: 'Documentary-collage' and English-Canadian Writing*, Toronto: U.T.P., 1995.

All this said, we can conclude this section by affirming that Michaels drives away from postmodern fashions in Canadian poetry. In view of this, Ondaatje's words on Michaels' poems surely gain a new light: "these are poems that go beyond games or fashion or politics...they represent the human being entire".

As I previously pointed out we can perceive in these poems Michaels' desire for adopting other voices. She inserts in their lines clues vaguely defined so as to push us to read the characters' biographies. At times, one is led to read even critical literature, since she usually deals with writers and painters. In many of these poems we find, however, a curious phenomenon: no matter how much she deepens into her documentary research, she fails in creating powerful and distinctive voices. Under all this framework of facts and data, her own subjectivity permeates every single line. Try to perceive any difference in terms of lyric voice in these three poems. We find the same tone, the same cadences, the same topic ('love unity'):

I.

Any discovery of form is a moment of memory,
existing as the historical moment – alone,
and existing in history – linear,
in music, in the sentence.
Each poem, each piece remembers us perfectly,
the way the earth remembers our bodies,
the way man and woman in their joining
remember each other before they were separate.

It's over twenty-five years and every love poem
says how your music and my words are the same:
praising the common air, the motive, the memory... ('Words for the Body' p. 48)

II.

For over twenty years
we've been joined: magician's hoops
caught and free, held together and apart
in desire and idea.
Like loons we travel underwater
great distances, to surface next to each other.

We burst up from water to air
to drift beside the serrated horizon of firs.

No matter where you are
or who you're near,
we come up for air together.

No matter my pace or distance,
it's you I surface to... ('Sublimation' p. 67)

III.

I know your value
because you give yourself
just as you're leaving.
Each sojourn refines our feeling –
together we are stones tumbling to jewels,
beans polishing in the coffee-dryer,
gleaming under the lanterns... ('Blue Vigour' p. 93)

Personally, I cannot find any difference of voice in these three examples. Yet, Michaels –as a lyric persona– is supposed to be talking in the first example; in the second, the one who speaks is the German writer Alfred Döbling, and in the third example, it is the Danish novelist Isak Dinesen. We may be tempted to account for this failure as a serious weakness in Michael's style. But this is not quite the case. Just as T. S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*, Michaels has adopted a poetic mask to indirectly and more comfortably express her own obsessions, as for example: the passage of time, the separation of the lovers or the permanent and crucial presence of memories in our daily lives.

The last poem 'What the light Teaches' may be a good example to summarise the whole of her poetry. Many of her concerns come to converge in its lines, rendering a beautiful reflection about the problematic nature of language. As Damaso Alonso "A un río le llamaban Carlos", Juan Ramón in *Eternidades* or T.S. Eliot in *Wasteland* ("sweet Thames..."), Michaels has chosen the image of the river to suggest the inexorable passing of time: "Countless times this river has been bruised by our bodies;/liquid fossils of light" (p. 109). This awareness of our own temporality encourages the writer to fix in language her own memories as well as to recreate from that same language the moments experienced by those preceding us in history. Moments and memories that remain, nonetheless, only partly recoverable:

The truth is why words fail.
We can only reveal by outline,
by circling absence.
But that's why language
can remember truth when it's not spoken.
Words in us that deafen,
that wait, even when their spell seems
wasted;
even while silence
accumulates to fate.

As a matter of fact, the complex dialectics between memory/experience and language appears as the thematic back-bone not only of this poem but of a great deal of her poetic production. Michaels herself provides us with some important clues that may be of some help in our approach and understanding of this subject-matter:

Language abandons experience every time. We hammer and measure, build our lines to the right length; but by the time the fence is up, the field seems empty...We drove under the immense night sky. Winter fields, a pale glow on earth; gegenschein. The horizon was a haze we entered. In the dark, in the zodiacal mist, in the green arc of the dashboard, we talked. Words were unaccountably precise; abstractions digestible! I felt bodily sated. But as we approached home, clarity dissolved like the headlights' beam in the city streets. The intimate language of those miles will never return. Whenever I attempt to utter the experience words turn it to dross; language is broken, bulky, dissolute. Fraudulent, inaccurate. Drunken. Too reverential, too referential. Lustreless or too lustrous⁶.

All this said, and however diffusely, 'language remembers'. Michaels has realized that our speech is the product of an individual performance as well as of a communal action in which history, tradition and the collective unconscious play an essential role. As she has written:

Language is the house with lamplight in its windows,
visible across the fields. Approaching, you can hear
music; closer, smell
soup, bay leaves, bread-a meal for anyone
who has only his tongue left.

6 A. Michaels, 'Cleopatra's Love' in *Poetry and Knowing*, Toronto: Quarry Press, 1995, pp. 178 (177-83).

It's a county; home; family;
abandoned; burned down, whole lines dead, unmarried.
For those who can't read their way in the streets,
or in the gestures and faces of strangers,
language is the house to run to;
in wild nights, chased by dogs and other sounds,
when you've been lost a long time,
when you have no other place (p. 119).

The voice of these poems is essentially Michaels' voice. However, the poetess deals with her language with great respect and care, knowing it hides innumerable echoes of the past. As a tireless archaeologist, Michaels excavates the poetic word in search for the remains that will link her with those who died and with those moments already lost in time. In my opinion, she better achieves this goal in her poetry when she gets rid of those intended poetic masks -of those dramatic devices- and assumes her own voice, as for example, in the poems 'Words for the Body', 'Miner's Pond' or 'What the Light Teaches'.

This does not imply that Michaels is not capable of successfully assuming other voices. *Fugitive Pieces* is a good proof of this. Just as a critic has suggested, the book displays a type of prose which can only be achieved by a poet: a style that masterfully conjugates a powerful lyricism, but at the same time does not lose its narrative content, its interest as a believable story. The problem with her 'documentary poems' relies, in my opinion, in the fact that their relative brevity impedes a development of a plot, a story that could mitigate the poetic nature of her writing. Michaels' is indeed a powerful lyric voice, unique in contemporary Canadian poetry. A voice which explores the deepest fears and joys of the human heart with tenderness and intelligence. It is precisely through that strange lyricism that she should venture her future steps in poetry; not to fall into an easy sentimentalism, but to fully explore herself through language.

APPENDIX

JANUARY

Greetings Giulio Clovio, to your health!

Today I finished the last panel – “January” – for Jonghelinck
and with the wheel’s perfect movement
winter’s in the sky again like a shadowy dye,
my footsteps in the wet snow followed me home.

How unlike your Rome. Here the light is dense
with smoke and complaints from the valley.
Mayken says even the hills want change these days.
I say nothing.
When people talk of gatherings and plans
I turn from them. Think what you will,
it’s a different life having meat with your soup.

I found my vantage for “January” near Van Mander’s,
above the pond. I tell you
sometimes my head aches from keeping the two worlds separate,
the landscape deeply still – even the crows
like stones on the branch – and our little flasks of life,
convulsed with blood and breathing.
Sometimes I feel their heartbeats when I paint,
regular, like a word repeated,
against the drone of the fields.
To clear my head, I focus on the foreground.
My link between life and death is that first figure,
who breathes, but is too large to move across the canvas.

For months after my visit with you
I painted only mountains.
When Martin came to see me
he laughed until he looked drunk
and shouted, “Well I know you swallowed the Alps,
but must you spit them out again?”
Now everyone in Antwerp repeats the joke.

There are no people in my mountains.
Why give them any smallness?
But you, with your Italian heart, would say
how sweeter the contrast,
how sweet man's varieties of pain and love
against the lazy infinity –
how long it's been since we argued!

It rubs my heart to think you'll never see the light
in my country, as you've shown me yours.
Perhaps we know only one place with certainty.
I know what you would say to this:
"Pieter, that place is your heart,"
and I say to you (with respect, of course)
how can this be?

My heart is everywhere. In the front room with Mayken,
and in Italy with you.
So I answer you in this hypothetical dialogue,
that this heart of yours must be God.
After a while you'll poke the fire
and drink from your favourite theme:
"impossible to paint well what you don't love"
and I'll answer with my own obsession,
that there's a feature of each face I love,
in each face, my own ugliness and imperfection
and those qualities I love for their striving,
their movement in the history of families.

So you'll laugh and ask:
"But do not those who are ugly
grow even uglier with time?"
Giulio, you're too quick for me.

Mayken asks why I don't paint her.
i don't know why,
except she's not everyone to me yet,
I can't make her human.

I painted all day and at night
I walked back to the place and looked down on the houses,
lamplight connecting the trees like fabric.
Standing in the damp breath of forest
I looked in your direction.

Are you on your balcony now?
Tomorrow morning Carel will come for this letter.
Each day he travels I'll look south.

Send me some of your Italian light,
even if it's not mine, I still miss it.
Send me the kind we labelled "before dinner, June"
or "dawn, the day Pieter Brueghel left for home."

Anne Michaels