

Between Past and Future: Temporal Thresholds in Narrative Texts

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Summary

This article is concerned with time and temporality in human experience as well as in narrative representation. The focus is directed at the representation of thresholds, threshold experiences, borders and boundaries in narrative texts, but where these concepts are more often than not analysed from a spatial perspective, the temporality of these forms of liminality is foregrounded here. Using Ricoeur's views on time, temporality, historicity and the representation of time as points of departure and referring to Jesse Matz's discussion of the postmodern time crisis, the so-called "era of the nanosecond", the representation of time-related themes and the aesthetic rendering of threshold experiences in Anne Michaels's novel *Fugitive Pieces* are explored.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel is gerig op tyd en temporaliteit in menslike ervaring sowel as in die representasie van narratiewe. Daar word gefokus op die representasie van drumpels, grenservarings, grense en limiete in verhalende tekste, maar terwyl hierdie konsepte meestal vanuit 'n ruimtelike perspektief ontleed word, word die temporele aspekte van hierdie vorme van liminaliteit in hierdie betoog vooropgestel. Deur gebruik te maak van Paul Ricoeur se sienings oor tyd, temporaliteit, historisiteit en die representasie van tyd as vertrekpunt en deur te verwys na Jesse Matz se uiteensetting van die postmoderne tydskrisis, die sogenaamde "era van die nanosekonde" word die representasie van die tydspanne en die estetiese representasie van drumpel-ervarings in Anne Michaels se roman *Fugitive Pieces* ontleed en bespreek.

Introduction: Threshold and Time

In this article I explore the temporal dimensions of the way in which the concept of the threshold is employed thematically and representationally in narrative fiction. The threshold is described by Manuel Aguirre (2006: 15) as that which separates as well as connects two spaces, whether this is a border, a link, an interstice or an interstitial place or space. The threshold is

therefore “betwixt and between” two spaces, touching both and forming part of both but belonging to neither – a liminal space and place. In a description such as this, the emphasis falls on the spatial nature or the physical and abstract topological aspects of the manifestations and representations of thresholds, but in the light of the inseparability of time and space in human experience and understanding as well as in narrative representations,¹ this article focuses on exploring the temporal dimensions of the concept of the threshold.

My argument here is concerned with the thematic aspects of thresholds as well as their transformational configurations in representations in narrative texts. The threshold, as a human experience, as a metaphor and as a representational technique, figures prominently in narrative texts. This is actually self-evident as most decisive events in narrative involve the crossing of a border or refer to some kind of change or transgression that implies a movement from one space to another.² Eventfulness as such is regarded as one of the basic characteristics of narrative, therefore narratives always imply change.³ Change can be analysed as the crossing of a threshold

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1. The interconnectedness of time and place in human experience as well as in temporality and spatiality in literary representations has always been recognised in narratology and narrative studies. The best example may perhaps be Bakhtin’s theoretical concept of the chronotope. In “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel”, Bakhtin (1981: 84-258) explains the inseparability of time and space in narrative representations. He defines the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (p. 84).
 2. A most significant and still relevant contribution to narrative theory concerning eventfulness in narrative texts, which can be linked to the idea of eventfulness, change and the crossing of thresholds, can be found in Jurij Lotman’s *The Structure of the Artistic Text*. Lotman (1977: 217) describes the narrative text as “an area of space demarcated in some way and reflecting in its finitude an infinite object: the world which lies outside the work of art”. This space is constructed on the model of the real world and is divided by a boundary between poles that are semantically relevant to the plot of the text. Lotman (1977: 234) regards an event in a text as the movement in which a figure crosses the boundary dividing the semantic space structured around the two poles. The boundary is therefore determined by the plot of a specific text: “A plot is organically related to a world picture which provides the scale for determining what constitutes an event”. The plot is thus regarded as “the revolutionary” element and the dynamic aspect of a narrative text.
 3. Peter Hühn (2010: 80) distinguishes between two types of events in narratives, which he refers to as event I and event II. Event I “involves all kinds of change of state”, while event II is “a special kind of change that meets certain additional conditions of being a decisive, unpredictable turn in the narrated happenings, a deviation from the normal expected course of

in a referential or thematic sense, and the way in which such a threshold is represented to endow it with specific meaning within a specific text is rather fascinating.

In the first part of the article, the aspects of the threshold which are relevant to my argument will be isolated, followed by a discussion of time in its experiential and represented forms. The theoretical exposition will be followed by an analysis of the temporal aspects of the threshold as a central metaphor and as a representational device in *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels. The article will be concluded by a discussion of the result of the analyses.

The Threshold

In the work of the Limen Group of Madrid,⁴ the term “liminal” is inter alia applied to “texts, genres or representations centered around the notion of the threshold, or whose fundamental theme is the idea of a crossover, an entry or a transgression into the unknown, the Other, the Numinous” (see also Soto 2000: 7-16). To analyse the thematic material on thresholds in narrative texts as well as the poetical aspects of the transformations and configurations in the representation of thresholds, I will be looking at narrative material concerned with margins and borders, interstices and links, also at the conflicts which cause such situations in narratives. Related themes are the loss of stability in interim periods during and after the breakdown of

things”. Events of the second category mark and distinguish the story and plot of a specific novel by attributing special significance and meaning to the event within the narrative. This distinction is reminiscent of Barthes’s distinction between cardinal and catalyst functions, but it explicitly emphasises the meaningful representation of the discourse level of the narrative text in the case of event II. Hühn (2010: 81) adds that the type II event is integral to a particular type of narrative and provides the *raison d’être* for a specific narrative. Readers expect a meaningful turn or a point of decisive change which constitutes the “tellability” or “narrativity” of a narrative where narrativity is used as a scalar category indicating a higher or lower ranking on the scale of being narrative and eventful (Hühn 2008: 143). When deviations from the expected development of events according to logical rules or according to the models of real life are presented, and when these deviations are also represented in a defamiliarising manner in a specific text, these events can, on account of their determining function in the specific text and on account of their foregrounded aesthetic rendering, be regarded as events of type II.

4. For information on the work of the Limen Group (Limen and Text) at the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid see [http: <///www.limenandtext.com/teams_LG.html>](http://www.limenandtext.com/teams_LG.html).

well-known patterns of behaviour or accepted laws and the processes of finding and adapting to new identities on account of changed circumstances after crossing a boundary. Inevitably the mental and psychological creativity or the regenerative responses elicited by disrupting external occurrences or internal changes will receive attention as well.

Descriptions of aspects of the threshold and of liminality usually primarily focus on the spatial nature of the threshold,⁵ but this argument centres on the

5. The following extended description of liminality has been developed by the Limen group of researchers in Madrid:

1. The threshold is betwixt and between X and Y, both X and Y, or neither X nor Y.
2. It challenges the Law of the Excluded Middle; it proposes itself as a *tertium quid*.
3. It is “a place that is not a place” (Turner), “the new, neither the one nor the other” (Bhabha).
4. It is ambiguous, ambivalent, polyvalent, equivocal, paradoxical, contradictory, all-embracing.
5. It exhibits properties different from those of ordinary space.
6. Being a frontier, it generates change; or it is itself a changing site.
7. It displays a concentration of meaning; or it is conspicuous for its meaninglessness.
8. It is unstable, hence unreliable.
9. It may exist as a multiplicity of versions of a text; hence it challenges fixed notions as to the stability of texts or of the single author.
10. It may therefore consist, not in the line between versions, but in the unstable or “dynamic” space shaped by a plurality of versions.
11. It is a site of power: the occupants of or passengers through the threshold are liable either to take this power upon themselves or to be subjected to it. It may be that in the liminal regions there is – paradoxically – no middle way.
12. Being charged with power, it is apt to be a site of numinosity, of promise and danger.

temporal aspects of ontological or referential liminal experience and thresholds as well as the representations of the temporality of these events in texts. Human understanding of life as well as of narratives is determined by the conceptual limits of time and space (Bridgeman 2007: 52-53). Understanding narratives therefore depends on understanding both the temporal and spatial relationships in the represented alternative (fictional) worlds but even more so on the ability to interpret the representational techniques through which the alternative worlds are depicted in narrative texts.

Time and the Representation of Temporality

The relation between human experience of time and the narrative representations of time is extremely complex.

Ricoeur's analysis of time is relevant for my argument because he begins by theorising the temporal ontology underlying narrative representations, but when he discusses the work of great novelists, the transforming potential of structured narrative temporality becomes apparent. The main characteristic of time according to Ricoeur is its discordance: time is split into past, present and future, it is simultaneously sequential and durative, experiential and cosmological, and eternal as well as transient. On the other hand, narrative is concordant discordance; it replies to the aporetics of time by structuring discordance and converting its paradoxes into an aesthetic dialectic (see also Matz 2011: 276).

Ricoeur (2002: 35) strives to elucidate a deeper experience of time that escapes the dichotomy between the chronology of sequence and the achronology of nomological,⁶ aesthetic or idiosyncratic models. To do so he puts forward three hypotheses:

- i. Narrativity and temporality are closely related as "temporality [is] that structure of existence that reaches language in narrativity and narrativity ... [is] the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent" (Ricoeur 2002: 35). Therefore Ricoeur attempts to find for each feature

13. Conversely, qua unstable, it is open, hence exposed, hence particularly vulnerable.

14. It can be either subversive or transcendental.

15. It opens up (or shapes) new universes (<<http://www.limen-andtext.com/liminality.html>>).

6. Nomological: Relating to, concerned with, or designating laws, esp. ones which are not logical necessities (Oxford English Dictionary).

of narrative a feature of temporality in an analysis of experiential time. Time as characters experience it in narrative is modelled on real/ontological time and refers to time in reality but is not a mimetic version of time in reality.

- ii. There are different degrees of temporal organisation which can be distinguished in the linearity of narrative in language. Ricoeur uses Heidegger's discussion of time as the basis of his description of how narrative temporality manifests itself on three levels: a) time "in" which events take place, b) time as "historicality" seen as the weight of the past, c) time as temporality reflecting the care emanating from reflection on the complexity of time in its simultaneity of past, present and future (ontologically and in representation) (Ricoeur 2002: 36).
- iii. Narrativity is dependent on the temporal implications of "plot". According to Ricoeur, plot lies at the crossing point of temporality and narrativity and this component of narrative should not be reduced to the anecdotic surface of the story (Ricoeur 2002: 35-37).

Ricoeur (2002: 38) also subscribes to Heidegger's distinction between ontological within-time-ness and the representation of time, and also to Heidegger's notion of man's "thrownness among things". This is important to my argument because often the most traumatic or most influential experience in reality is caused by external occurrences from which the subject/character cannot escape and which are not of his own doing: characters are thrown into situations or circumstances just as man has to contend with the unsympathetic, cold and hard aspects of real life.

To survive an absolutely unexpected trauma sometimes requires almost superhuman endurance and this is a prominent theme in many noteworthy narratives. In an attempt to analyse the human ability to work through and survive trauma as time passes, Heidegger speaks of *das Vorhandene*, "things of our concern", which consist of subsisting things which our concern counts on, and of *das Zuhandene* which refers to things offered to our manipulation as enabling and empowering aspects in specific situations for specific personalities. The experiencing person is depicted within an existentially constituted world because "(w)ithin-time-ness ... possesses its own specific features which are not reducible to the representation of linear time, a neutral series of abstract instants" (Ricoeur 2002: 38). Expected normal behaviour, the Heideggerian "Dasein", historicises from day to day, "but in narrative activity, however, there is a dissimulation both of historicality and, even more so, of the deeper levels of temporality" (Ricoeur 2002: 40). Narrative presents the truth of within-time-ness through its particular authenticity which seems to be inauthentic but which is authentic in that it represents an original existential structure in which reflection on the meaning of time, on historicality and temporality is incorporated. In their temporal representations narratives therefore lie convincingly as their

rendering of the problematic of time can be more truthful and provide more insight than the historical experience itself. Aesthetic narrative texts do not mime real time, absolutely not, but they seek to find and represent the true value and meaning of temporal experience. In Ricoeur's (2002: 40) formulation, "narrative structure confirms existential analysis".

Very important to the argument here is the point that Ricoeur makes about the dialectical tension in being able to act while also being bound to the world order, where the indifference of the world order implies man's thrownness into the world. The relevance of the thematic content of a narrative and its implied importance or actuality for the character or for humanity in more universal terms depends on this dialectic tension to which readers relate. The meaning of the relevant thematic content is highlighted and foregrounded by narrative techniques to convey to the reader meaning and new insight instead of mere information. This is especially relevant in the case of the Holocaust narratives as the ethical debates about representing the Holocaust in fiction calls attention to the problematics of trauma and potential unethical appropriations of trauma represented in novels.⁷

Ricoeur (2002: 43-45) discusses the configurational dimension of narrative material for which he uses the term plot extensively, referring to the reader's ability to read a plot as the objective correlate of the act of following or understanding a story, that is, a referential or chronological series of events. This reference to the role of the reader is important for the direction my argument will take later on. Ricoeur emphasises that the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events, eliciting a pattern from mere succession, thus incorporating reflective judgement by confronting and combining sequence and pattern. Achronological models and patterns or codes not only establish humanity "in time", but "also [bring] us back from within-time-ness to historicity, from 'reckoning with' time to 'recollecting' it" (Ricoeur 2002: 44).

To Ricoeur, the transformation of existential experience or mere sequences of events into represented narrative configurations is the temporal dialectic underlying all narrative. The plot actually restructures episodic events into a configurational arrangement which can be read as a significant whole, and this reflective act translates the plot into one "thought", the theme or overall meaning of the text as a whole. In this process itself, but also for characters as well as in the act of reading, memory and recollection play an important role: the structuring depends on reflective "recollection". Memory, the ability (or lack of it) to recall and reflect is important in the development of characters and characterisation in texts, but readers are also to remember to

7. The problematic nature of writing fiction about the Holocaust is extensively discussed by Williams and Polatinsky (2009: 1-14) who refer to Anne Michaels's view that it would be unthinkable "not to write" about the Holocaust.

put together the underlying story of the narrative as well as understand the meaning of the configuration.

Ricoeur's philosophical exposition of the categories of time, namely the dialectical relation between existential time and representational time (and its potential aesthetic meaning) can be linked to older as well as to more recent and practical theoretical views. I mention the contributions of two theorists. Though this theoretical work was initially developed within a structuralist approach, the temporal categories and relations that Gerard Genette (1982) distinguished and elaborated on (referring to Marcel Proust's novel *In Search of Lost Time/A la recherche du temps perdu*) still form the theoretical basis of the analysis of temporality in contemporary narratological and even post-classical narratological analyses. Using the distinction of story, plot and narration (*histoire, récit, narration*) as basis, Genette presents an extended theory of temporal relations which potentially manifest on the level of the plot (*récit*). Genette identifies three main categories of temporal reorganisation of narrative material in narrative texts, namely order, duration and frequency, but the specific meaning of the temporal relations in narrative texts depends on the specificity of the representational configuration of the narrative content in a specific text. For this article I have chosen to use Ricoeur's view of time because I am primarily interested in what time as time means or could or might mean and not in the detailed description or analysis and interpretation of specific techniques of representing temporality.

The experiential and representational aspects of time in narrative are also described by cognitive theorists. Thus the cognitive psychologist John Michon (in Matz 2011: 277) describes temporal pre-understanding as "tuning" which is transformed into a variety of narrative configurations in narrative texts. The narrative temporality in these texts has to be reconfigured to be understood, and Michon calls this cycle of temporal manipulations and conceptualisations "time". I find "tuning" a rather vague term in the light of the much more sophisticated distinctions previously made by philosophers and narratologists, but it does confirm the validity of temporal distinctions as cognitive studies of the mind indicate that similar mental processes determine the understanding of time prior to reading a text and as such determine the (re)construction of textual time.

An exploration of the representation of time in novels provides innumerable examples of techniques and narrative strategies which function in a variety of ways to link up with and interact with plot, character and thematic development in every specific text.⁸ In *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne

8. Other publications by the author of this article on time and the representation of temporality in literary texts are "In terme van tyd: Die temporele dimensie van die representasie van grense in *Agaat* van Marlene van Niekerk" (du Plooy 2013) in which the emphasis falls on time as temporality and the care emanating from reflection on the complexity of time in its simultaneity of

Michaels, several key events and salient moments in the plot of the novel can be regarded as threshold experiences, and these are foregrounded by the narrative techniques employed. The following discussion first provides a more general description of the structure of the novel and then proceeds to identify and analyse the representation of instances of liminality and threshold experiences as these form the bases of important thematic aspects of the novel. The focus is directed at the foregrounding of boundaries and the crossing of thresholds and at the temporal dimensions of the characters' transitional experiences so as to indicate and interpret the importance and meaningfulness of temporality and temporal relations in narrative representation.

***Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels**

The novel *Fugitive Pieces* by Anne Michaels (1997)⁹ is divided into two parts that partially mirror each other. Not only does each part contain a narrative of a man trying to find his way in the present by reconstructing his past and trying to attach meaning to what happened in the past, but both characters, Jakob Beer in the first section and Ben in the second, are in danger of becoming psychologically and emotionally paralysed by what they do not know about their past.

The two sections of the novel are also structurally linked in various ways, one of which is that the titles of some of the chapters in the two sections are the same. The titles per se are also significant, referring to either time or place or both (see also Kanyioti 2004). Chapter titles that appear in both sections are "The Drowned City" which refers to place; "Vertical Time" which calls forth associations with both time and spatiality; "The Way Station", which not only refers to a place but also to travelling and a potential transition; and "Phosphorus", which can be associated with visuality. In the first section of the novel there is a chapter entitled "Terra Nullius", which is suggestive of place which is no place at all, and the final chapter of this section of the novel is entitled "The Gradual Instant". This is an indication of the view of time in the novel that refers to the lasting effect of a moment or a specific experience. The past and the facts of a life cannot be

past, present and future, and "Die beeld is duursamer as die begrip" (du Plooy 2014) which discusses the legacy of N.P. van Wyk Louw in terms of the historicity of literature and the weight of the past.

9. Subsequent references to *Fugitive Pieces* (Michaels 1997) are indicated by page number(s) only.

left behind, and the passing of time is irrelevant when it comes to understanding and transcending trauma.¹⁰

Time as such is an important theme in the novel, but it is also clear that a constant awareness of the connectedness of time and space determines the selection of the content of the novel as well as the manner of narration. Both narratives are intensely concerned with the experiential boundary between present and past as historicity, and both main characters struggle to cope with being locked in this vague domain of interim time. The novel begins with the phrase "Time is a blind guide" (5). Jakob Beer feels that he did not witness the most important events that determined the course of his life. Because he did not experience the time and place of these events simultaneously it seems to him that he is denied understanding the meaning of what happened. Near the end of the first section of the book, when he goes to the Greek island Idhra "to press to tearing certain questions" (159), he refers to "(t)he bond of memory and history when they share space and time" and concludes that "[t]he event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed" (162).

Jakob Beer is 7 years old when his parents are killed during the Second World War. They are Polish Jews who live in a small town. When soldiers force open the door of their home, they hide the little boy in a cupboard space behind the wallpaper. Jakob does not see what happens, he only hears the ominous sounds: "Since those minutes in the wall, I've imagined that the dead lose every sense except hearing" (6). When everything goes quiet, he creeps out of his hiding place only to find that he cannot go to his parents because that would mean "stepping on their blood" (7). His sister has disappeared and he never learns what happened to her. He runs away from the house, crosses the river to the island of the ancient city Biskupin and hides in the forest by digging a shallow hole in the ground and lying down in it. During the day he lies under a blanket of leaves and by night he goes out to find food. When he reaches "the end of [his] strength" (12), he approaches a man he sees digging in the ground near his hiding place. The man called Athos, a Greek geologist who does excavation work on the ruins of Biskupin, takes pity on the lost child and escapes with him hidden under his coat. He raises Jakob in Greece, but later they emigrate to Canada.

The second narrative is about Ben, the son of Jewish parents who have survived the Holocaust. They go to Canada but repress their memories and never talk about the past. This leaves their son in a historical void. Ben

10. There is a thematic similarity between *Fugitive Pieces* and the Dutch novel *De aanslag* [The Assault] by Harry Mulisch (1982), in which the central character's whole life is also determined by the traumatic events of one single night. It takes him the greater part of his life to reconstruct the traumatic event that shattered his whole world. One of the main themes in the novel is a person's being kept prisoner by the past and having to come to terms with the past before being able to move into his future.

realises that their past contains unbearable details, and this is proved when he eventually, after his parents' death, discovers the photograph of two children, apparently his brother and sister, who did not survive the ordeal of the war. His parents never share this knowledge with Ben or explain it to him because they never escape from their fears and never overcome their trauma. He has to reconstruct their past to be able to accept his own right to a future.

The central issue in both these lives is the influence of the past on the present and the future. Jakob and Ben experience themselves as being kept prisoner by the past and they feel emotionally frozen or paralysed by past events and traumas that are either unknown to them or that they understand only partially. In such a situation there is a real danger that a person can get lost in the temporal void between present and past.

Jakob is saved from this possibility by Athos who teaches him survival skills in a subtle way. Jakob is not only physically saved by Athos but also psychologically because Athos prevents him from "falling too deep" into himself. Jakob feels a responsibility to keep remembering what happened to his family, especially to his sister Bella. He says:

History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral; what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers Memory is the Memorbucher ...

(138)

His first wife, Alex, does not understand Jakob's need to remember, and he experiences her attitude as destructive. Whereas "Athos replaced parts of me slowly, as if he were preserving wood", Alex wants him to forget, and he cannot allow that to happen (144).

It also takes Ben a long time to understand his parents' secretiveness about the past. They expect him to live in the void which they have chosen for themselves. The suggestion is that they find themselves unable to handle the situation differently and they do not realise the effect this has on their son. Eventually one of the things that help Ben to cope is reading and studying Jakob Beer's poetry that speaks of transcending trauma, and Jakob becomes a role model for Ben.

Boundaries and Isolation

From an analysis of the traumatic events of Jakob Beer's life it is evident that the child has to cross boundaries or thresholds repeatedly. He is hidden behind the panelling and wallpaper and hears his family being killed; he can interpret the sounds coming from his parents, but he does not hear anything from his sister Bella. The world into which he re-emerges is forever changed – he was not only placed in a liminal space behind the panelling while the

tragedy was being played out, but he also crosses a threshold into a strange place of cruelty and death and fear when he comes out of hiding. When he runs away, he crosses the river and looks back at the burning town, seeing “the colour of flesh transforming the spirit” (7), suggestive of the next boundary he has crossed. The forest is described as a dark box in which he “plants” himself “like a turnip” and covers himself with leaves (8). When he has reached the end of his tether, when his desperation is more intense than his fear, he approaches the archaeologist he has seen working in the forest. To do this he has to leave his grave-like hiding place, his almost assumed death in which he finds temporary safety, and it takes all his courage to do this.

He faces a dramatic and ominous boundary when he has to get out of his physical hiding place. This implies crossing a psychological threshold as well because he has to emerge from the safe enclosure he has made for himself and in which he felt that he had exited from the cruelty and terror of the world. He has to end the self-inflicted numbness of his emotional isolation and make contact with another person who is a complete stranger to him. Jakob Beer as narrator describes himself as a “bog-boy ... [who] ... surfaced into the miry streets of the drowned city” and as an “afterbirth of earth” (5), which suggests that he has to literally enter another domain of existence to make contact with the strange man. It takes all his courage to cross this boundary and approach another human being, to leave the cold safety of his hole in the forest bed and cross the barrier of fear to reach out for help. Athos later describes this event and tells Jakob that he stopped as if he had “hit a glass door” (12), once again using an image of a boundary.

On the journey to Greece they repeatedly have to cross borders, and Jakob feels his head burning as if all the people he had known up to then were “yanked right through [his] scalp” (13). Leaving his whole known life behind becomes a physical experience, his body registers the loss as if everything dear to him were torn from his head.

Liminal zones are usually described as those zones where normal patterns of behaviour are disrupted and where normal laws do not apply. This novel depicts different forms of liminality seemingly embedded in each other. War is in itself a liminal situation, and the fact that Jakob’s parents and his sister and Ben’s siblings are killed is the result of the law of war, the ultimate example of an alternative system of laws that justifies the killing of people. Within this system which tolerates and facilitates evil, the families of Jakob and Ben are torn apart. Jakob is pushed over a boundary into a liminal zone where he has no idea of what the present means and what the future might hold. Ben does not understand his parents’ fear and grief and grows up in an emotional void.

Against the background of war, Jakob is not only confronted with the lawlessness of the war as such, but by a loss of all the patterns of behaviour and knowledge and all security familiar to him. He does not know what to

do or to expect because the disruption severs the links between the past on the one hand and the present and future on the other. The world becomes a bewilderingly strange and unpredictable place. The child is lost in a world dominated by the law of war, which causes all other systems to give way and break down.

What is even worse, is that the disruptive and evil forces of war not only force people like Jakob and Ben's parents into physical and psychological liminal zones but also "appropriate" these people in that symbolically, and in some cases psychologically as well, there is no return from this alternative world. Aguirre (2006: 16) points out that a threshold could expand and become a domain, but also that the liminal figures or threshold people could become part of the Other or the domain of the Other.

In *Fugitive Pieces* this indeed happens. Jakob crosses a threshold and gets stuck in this moment. He cannot return to his present and relives his past while the present passes him by for the greater part of his life. Ben's parents become victims of the war to such an extent that they lose their capacity to function normally in their new lives in Canada. They do not become actors in a new life but remain victims and as such they are and remain part of the horror that pushed them over the boundaries of human endurance. The victims of war thus become part of the war zone, but within the liminality forced on them by the war they retreat into a further liminal zone, living at least twice removed from the here and now. This situation also continues indefinitely.

The basic pattern of Jakob's life is a series of threshold experiences represented in the opening scenes of the novel as a sequence of events reconstructed backwards. When Jakob approaches Athos, he has to step through his fear which is represented spatially by his emergence from the hole in the ground. The novel starts with this scene, with Jakob forcing himself to "surface" from his place of safety in the mud and beneath the leaves to confront the boundary between him and Athos. Temporally this emergence from a liminal space is foregrounded by representing it as the first event in the novel. Spatially literally behind and historically before the hole in the forest bed, is the river which is also a boundary that had to be crossed, but this border crossing is told retrospectively after the meeting with Athos. Also spatially behind and historically before the river and represented afterwards, is the house from which Jakob escaped, the house with the hole in the wall behind the wallpaper.¹¹ These events are not represented chronologically but backwards such as the experiences have become memories embedded in one another.

11. I do not analyse spatiality in this article, but it plays along the undercurrents of the argument as time and space are always interrelated. See also Kandiyoti (2004).

Moreover, it is as if feeling and being removed from other people is established as the basic pattern of Jakob Beer's life by the event in his parents' home. Jakob's story is told as a first-person narrative, and Jakob is also the focaliser, and therefore the manner of narration becomes an enactment of the content of what is told. As narrator he repeatedly emphasises his alienation when he writes down his story. It is clear that he feels as if he is watching the world and even himself from behind a boundary; the metaphors chosen in the novel reinforce this idea very strongly. Jakob as narrator sums it up as follows, referring to the night of terror as well as to his early life with Athos:

I did not witness the most important events of my life. My deepest story must be told by a blind man, a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground. From the corner of a small house on a small island that juts like a bone from the skin of the sea.

(17)

Jakob continues to describe his life with Athos on the Greek island of Zakynthos in terms of metaphors for isolation. It is as if he wants to disappear from his own life. An island is indeed an isolated, separate piece of land and the island becomes the basic metaphor for Jakob's life: he lives "close to the sky", his bedroom window opens "emptily to sea", at night he climbs through the window to lie on the roof but in daytime "I stayed in the small bedroom, willing my skin to take on the woodgrain of the floor, to take on the pattern of the rug or the bedcover, so I could disappear simply by stillness" (18). His basic mode of living is a continuous attempt to disappear, to become part of the surroundings, to observe without being seen and not to act. To him his life on the island is "as inaccessible as another dimension" (26), but that is also true of his later life. In his first marriage he never learns to move from his own private space and sticks to his responsibility towards the past to such an extent that his marriage fails. The same patterns of being locked in the past, of reliving the past, of keeping the past alive on account of his family, of experiencing himself as being isolated from others, of surviving by being unobtrusive keep dominating his lifestyle.

It is important, however, to note the repetitiveness of the experiences that the author selects to represent in the novel, especially experiences of emerging and crossing boundaries and being separate or isolated. Williams and Polatinsky (2009) discuss how the novel illustrates the relevance of Cathy Caruth's idea of the repetitive nature of trauma. And the repetition does not only occur in Jakob's life as such but is also mirrored by Ben's life, not only in terms of similar surroundings (forests repeatedly play a role in the lives of both characters) but also in the narrative development (Jakob loses his sister, and Ben a brother and sister, and both are haunted by memories). The repetitive representations of these memories form an underlying matrix in the novel.

Jakob Beer's struggle towards self-acceptance through writing is re-enacted in the experience of Ben, the Canadian son of Holocaust survivors who becomes an academic and a writer. Themes and images are repeated with shaded variations, yet resolution remains elusive Perhaps most powerful are the memories which criss-cross the text, raising specters, renewing suffering, clinging to an irremediable history which resists the closure of lucid comprehension.

(Williams & Polatinsky 2009: 6)

The representation of the first part of Jakob's story moreover consists of short disjunct passages which do not follow a chronological pattern. These passages almost iconically mime the child's disorientation and the lack of logic and causality which characterise trauma narratives. This style of narration indirectly implies that the older Jakob Beer who writes down the story can only recall these events in terms of disruption and silence, of language being inadequate and smothered by the radical threshold experiences he has undergone. The highly metaphorical language intensifies the emotional impact of the narration because the events as such are described tersely and economically. It is as if the narrator could still not bear to dwell on the details even if he wrote down his story many years later.

Memory

The concern with the problematics of time and memory is sustained throughout the novel thematically as well as metaphorically. The narrator says: "I learned to tolerate images rising in me like bruises" (19). He cannot yet transcend the trauma and the shock and keeps considering fear the strongest emotion. He describes himself during their stay on Zakynthos: "I spent the day writing my letter to the dead and was answered at night in my sleep" (19). He is kept prisoner by the terrors of the past and his responsibility to honour his parents and especially Bella who has disappeared by remembering them constantly.

Actually it is the absence of a specific memory of his sister that haunts Jakob Beer and keeps him imprisoned on the threshold between past and present. He is "transfixed by the way time buckled, met itself in pleats and folds" (30), he listens for sounds from the past with his ear "pressed against the thin wall between the living and the dead" (31). He wonders if his remembering his parents and sister is not as painful to them as it is to him, whether he is not denying them their right to be absent, and this makes him even more lonely. He suffers for all the Jews that had to hide themselves and he feels as if he shares their burying themselves.

The symbolic meaning of Athos's occupation as geologist is linked to this. According to Athos, time has stopped for those who are buried, but he urges Jakob to live in this life, saying that he cannot "save a boy from a burning

building. Instead he [the boy] must save me from the attempt; he must jump to earth" (45).

Through his youth Jakob is always in danger of "falling into myself too far" (60) and Athos's care is what saves him. But his memories are always just beneath the surface. Listening to a conversation between Athos and his friends, fragmented memories from the past shoot up into Jakob's mind, interspersing what he hears and records: "When they pushed my father, he was still sitting in his chair ... I could tell by the way he fell" (62-63).

In a similar style, the memories of Bella would crop up at the most unexpected times. She becomes to him the symbol of loss and guilt: "The moment I failed to see Bella had disappeared" (111). His loneliness does not go away and he feels that he lives "a breath apart" (111). This is the mark of his life, also when he accompanies Athos to Canada. The child has crossed a threshold into a liminal zone and even as a man he does not really return to normal life patterns: the threshold is not merely crossed, it expands to become a place and a temporal zone almost for life. The third phase of the usual liminal cycle does not happen for him. His marriage fails because he is distanced from life and from people, he remains an outsider, an onlooker. Only over time does he realise that "history is the gradual instant" (77) and that healing grief requires time (54), but he still cannot make it happen for himself because he cannot accept the present as the dominant historical moment.

He keeps a distanced attitude to people and events until he meets Michaela. This happens only after he has moved back to Greece to live on Idhra where he starts writing down his life's story and returns to Canada for a short visit. In Michaela's love Jakob recovers himself at last, but he is also able to love again only when he has written his story. He feels that he, as a person suffering from the guilt of not having witnessed Bella's disappearance or death, is recognised for the first time when Michaela cries for Bella. Only then can he sleep "the first sleep of his life" (182). He can relinquish his search and his wake for Bella, because Michaela helps him carry the burden. When they make love in a storm in a little tent in a forest he fully accepts the love that has come to him in a scene which can be regarded as the supplement or better still the complement or completion of the opening scenes of the book in which he is described as buried in the forest. The circle is closed at last and he can let go, he can lose himself and make peace with the past: "This is where I become irrevocably unmoored. The river floods. I slip free the knot and float, suspended in the present" (188).

This description refers to Jakob crossing another threshold, and it is significant that this crossing is described in historical or temporal terms, namely that he arrives in his present. When he can transcend the past he crosses the threshold into the present. After a life of living in a temporal liminality, touching past and present but not being "within" either, he is at last able to leave the in-between space and time.

Language, Liminality and Beauty

Another aspect that emphasises the liminality of Jakob Beer's new life is the fact that he speaks Jiddish, Polish and German and has to learn English and Greek from Athos. He therefore also encounters a linguistic barrier which he must cross to communicate and to survive. He realises that if he is strong enough to accept it, he is "offered a second history", and Athos tells him when he teaches him new words: "It is your future that you are remembering" (21).

Julia Kristeva (1991: 15-16) writes about an existence "between" languages when "the language of the past ... withers without ever leaving you" and about "the silence of the polyglots" in which "between two languages, your realm is silence". For Jakob the loss of his natural first language is traumatic when he realises that his Yiddish is becoming "a melody gradually eaten away by silence" (28). Athos, however, gently steers him away from his traumatic past, and stories and language are instrumental in this process of "diluting" Jakob's memory.

Jacob can see the writing down of the story of his life as an exercise in ordering the turbulent content of his memory, but it is also an act of creativity, of recreating himself in a beautiful rendering of terrible events (Coffey 2007: 27-49).¹²

The key to the eventual transcendence of his dilemma lies exactly in what Athos teaches him, namely the importance of beauty: "Find a way to make beauty necessary; find a way to make necessity beautiful" (44). Jakob becomes a poet and through poetic language learns to find himself. Later he realises: "I already knew the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate. But poetry, the power of language to restore: this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach me" (79).

It is therefore fitting that the consummation of Jakob and Michaela's love is described in intensely poetic language, which is an illustration of how Jakob, the poet, thinks about and experiences the healing power of art and language. Actually the whole novel is carefully constructed and metaphorically and poetically formulated – which is iconic of the way in which

12. The beneficial nature of reconstructing a life through narrative is also recognised in narrative therapy and psychoanalysis. About the recycling of traumatic memories, Julia Kristeva (in Goldhammer 1988: 60) writes as follows:

The analyst never looks upon symptoms and fantasies as aberrations but instead sees them as truths of the speaking subject, even if to cool judgment they seem to be delusions. I take them seriously, then, but as references to the past; by reviving them in therapy, I immolate them. They do not disappear, however, but at best assume a new configuration, one that we hope is more beneficial for the subject and those around him.

Jakob Beer would indeed reconstruct his life according to what Athos taught him. Not only the healing power of narrative as such, but also the aesthetic aspects of narration such as temporality and style, assist both Jakob Beer and Ben to transcend the horror of a traumatic past.

Thresholds, Language and Time

From the analysis of *Fugitive Pieces*, some conclusions with regard to the thematic and representational aspects of thresholds can be drawn. The novel seems to state and illustrate the efficacy of aesthetic form in generating and foregrounding meaning, but it also shows the value of narrative in transcending threshold experiences. One can therefore conclude that the threshold is an important theme as well as a narrational device in the novel and that the temporal implications of threshold experiences are very important in understanding the concept as well as the text. I will discuss these statements in more detail, also referring to some related issues which I find interesting and noteworthy.

1

The narrative structure of *Fugitive Pieces*, which disregards chronology, is ordered according to the psychological associations of the narrators as characters, and which depends on a creative use of narrative strategies, is determined by the traumatic narrative content.

Cathy Caruth (1996: 4) describes trauma in a psychoanalytic sense as a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self and the world”. A traumatised person lives in an unmapped territory which cannot be represented in a linear narrative, and according to Caruth, trauma narratives inevitably involve a doubled or layered narration, an “oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival” (1996: 7; italics in original). This applies to the narratives of both Jakob Beer and Ben. Jakob relives his experiences by writing his own narrative, also by writing poetry. Ben uses Jakob as a role model but is also an academic and a writer. By reading Jakob’s poetry and by reconstructing Jakob’s life, living in his house and reading what Jakob and Michaela read, while pondering his own parents’ story, he also finds a way to get a grasp on his own life and so to speak return to his future. There is thus also a redoubling in his narrative. In both cases the writing down of the traumatic life story proves to be the key to healing – the restructuring of the experience which entails memory and reflection as well as the discipline of

the narrative form of communication enables both narrators to come to terms (to a certain extent) with their past.

One has to mention the fact that serious differences of opinion exist on the possibility or desirability of writing fiction about the Holocaust (Williams & Politansky 2009: 2, 7-10). Michaels attempts to escape this problematic by having her characters confront the temporal and spatial dimensions of the historicity of the events that shape their lives through narrative. This happens in both Jakob's case and Ben's. The awareness of the constructedness of the novel in the use of repetitive structures and themes, the careful managing of the balance between direct information and suggestions to escape sentimentality, as well as the underlying networks of indices constituted by repetitive events and metaphors and the development of related metaphoric and semantic fields all contribute to keeping the reader aware of the representational nature of the text as text. Michaels uses deeply defamiliarising language, "(l)anguage that defies, even as it claims our understanding" (Caruth 1996: 6).

Imagination and poetic language enable one to gain insight into the incomprehensible facts of history on a personal and collective level because of the open-endedness of poetic language. In narrative texts, temporal patterns such as order, frequency and duration, changes in focalisation, narrative voice and distance are employed as devices to enhance the textuality of the narrative in order to elicit the empathy of readers but also to maintain the necessary distance to make an ethical understanding of the thematic material possible.

2

To my mind this novel is deeply concerned with the universal problematic of time as explained by Heidegger and Ricoeur. The main characters are indeed thrown into a set of impossible circumstances which become the within-time-ness of their lives. They lose all the things of their concern, *das Vorhandene* (subsisting things which our concern counts on), and has to survive with *das Zuhandene* (things available to them). The most prominent theme in the novel is indeed time and the ability to manage past, present and future and the thresholds between these dimensions of time. For these characters time is disrupted severely, they experience the most extreme form of temporal discordance. It is then important to see that in the story, that is, the novel's narrative content, narrative plays an important role as the instrument of survival, but the novel as such also demonstrates the importance and power of narrative understanding by restructuring time, using concordant narrative to narrate the discordance of past reality in an aesthetic dialectic to address and attempt to solve the aporetics of the historical experience of time.

The Function of Reading Temporality in Narrative Texts

The experience and the understanding of time are determined to a great extent by cultural and historical modes of thinking complicating the individual's relation to world systems and thought systems. In his article "The Art of Time, Theory and Practice", Jesse Matz (2011: 273) explores the problem of time in postmodern culture, an issue addressed extensively by the most prominent philosophers and theorists of postmodernity.¹³

Postmodern man is caught within "the epoch of the nanosecond" and its consequences. A life of continuous haste and overstimulation and simultaneity might result in loss of the capacity to grasp and manage time across the temporal manifold. The result is a certain cultural incoherence which we seem unable to resolve. Time stress is caused by the experience of only "time today" and destroys the ability of people living in the postmodern age "to distinguish strongly but flexibly among past, present, and future, to pattern out all possible durations" (Matz 2011: 273) so that they can organise and reconstruct their lives into coherent experience. According to Matz, there is a reciprocity between the time crisis and the crises in postmodernist thought, memory and experience, and it seems that postmodern time crisis theorists believe at the present time nothing can be done about it because the problem itself and the potential solving of the problem are both liable to the same set of circumstances and constraints.¹⁴

Matz, however, believes that narrativity and narrative theory can reverse this vicious circle and has done so in the past because "narrative engagement creates human time even as (or just because) modernity would destroy it" (Matz 2011: 273). He goes on to trace how the "reciprocities of time and narrative" have influenced the human sense of narrative in the twentieth century and suggests that "we consider human time a matter of active, deliberate performance, not just a hermeneutical given but an achievement of collaborative human action or perhaps even an individual accomplishment" (p. 274). This is exactly what happens in *Fugitive Pieces*, and this is what I tried to indicate in the analyses of the novel. The main questions Matz puts forward are: Can narrative forms cultivate or restore real-world temporalities? Can texts model ways to reinvent time aesthetically, or restore or innovate temporal possibilities? Is aesthetic dealing with time real solving of time crises? Matz's hypothesis is "that narrative's temporal

13. Matz (2011: 273) mentions contributions on the postmodern time crisis by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Antonio Negri, Richard Sennet, and James Gleick.

14. Although this article does not address the issue of modernity, postmodernity or post-postmodernity with regard to *Fugitive Pieces*, the phenomena that Matz describes in his article are most relevant for the discussion of the manifestations of temporality in the novel.

dynamics, its performance of durations, frequencies, speeds, and other time-schemes, might constitute ‘an art of time’ through which to practice temporal diversity” (p. 275).

The way in which Anne Michaels portrays her characters seems to suggest that eventually, after the gradual instant of the long time needed to process grief, narrative does have a beneficial potential for traumatised people and narration as such implies a careful consideration of all the aspects of time and historicity. The care with which the past should be reconsidered takes time and the result can also only be narrated in time and with a sensitivity for temporal relations. And it seems that psychologists and novelists are unanimous in their belief that this is indeed a healing and profoundly beneficial process. Whether reading this or any other novel could facilitate a similar outcome for a postmodern reader is debatable, but the popularity of life writing, blogs and the (often intimate and personal) information offered on social networks such as Facebook, seem to suggest that narrative communication is indeed still functioning as a prominent or even dominant human activity as it has been since times immemorial.

Conclusion

My argument in this article can be summarised as follows. Strategies of representing thresholds in a historical as well as in an aesthetic way are especially meaningful in *Fugitive Pieces*. Anne Michaels succeeds in representing the aporia of referential experiences by approaching the narrative material indirectly and by using poetic language. The open-endedness of metaphoric language enables the author to write about contentious narrative and historical material suggestive of the aporetic nature of the referential material. She does not try to resolve these but creates new aporias in the narrative text by opening up the imagination through aesthetic narrative and poetic techniques. In this way the layered narrative style contributes to the multiplicity of meanings of the text, thus representing the force of the experiences of the main characters.

The complete breakdown of continuity in the lives of the characters, especially in Jakob Beer’s life but also in Ben’s, leads to a series of liminal situations and threshold experiences, a pattern from which the characters seem unable to escape. Though liminality and thresholds are spatial concepts, the temporal dimension of human experience and the narrative rendering of events are important in this novel and must be taken into account in analysing this text, but the temporal aspect of thresholds can also be regarded as a feature of narrative texts and narrative representations of trauma in general. For human beings the present is the future of the past and the future is a potential continuation of the present so that a radical breach in the linearity of experience and the intense awareness of death as the ultimate

breach of linear progression profoundly disrupts the subject's sense of continuity, resulting in liminal and threshold experiences. In *Fugitive Pieces* the recuperation or reconstitution of the self after trauma is represented as an ongoing process in which narrative features prominently. Closure will never be completely achieved, but the reconstruction of the past through narrative may help the subjects to exit from the expanded threshold that imprisons them. Whether the variety of ways in which time is represented, presenting readers with many possibilities of interacting with fact, perception and responsibility for the past and the present, could enable readers to resolve or transcend their own temporal historical crises, remains an open question, but in reading narrative, readers could perhaps practise their ability to manage time, to interact with and reflect on their past and their future and improve their own ability to construct a coherent story for themselves.

The conclusion of my argument in this article concerns the use of the threshold as a prominent theme and device in literature, as event or as symbol or metaphor. I do believe that liminal zones and experiences are used in literature so often and in so many ways because they are attributes of our thrownness into the world, that we have to cross boundaries, that people and circumstances develop and change in ways which are sometimes very traumatic. We live within time and have to adapt constantly to the changing patterns of reality physically, psychologically, and ideologically, and this inevitably entails threshold situations and processes.

The fact that all people live with the knowledge of the inevitability of their own death is the ultimate example of our thrownness into the world and of the ultimate boundary. Trying to escape from this boundary or at least postponing having to cross it is the stuff most stories are made of. The fact that liminal situations and thresholds seem to appear everywhere and that these concepts can be applied in so many ways does not detract from the relevance of the concept or from its efficacy as an aesthetic device. Liminality and thresholds are essentially spatio-temporal concepts and as such are deeply rooted in human experience of historicity and in understanding change and eventfulness as an attribute of human life, but in literature the representation of these concepts and experiences has become an effective aesthetic device to promote a deeper understanding of being human.

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