

DOCUMENTS**A Conversation about Anne Michaels' *Correspondences*****Anne Michaels, Sam Solecki**

This conversation took place over a period of two days in Toronto early in the summer of 2013, several months before the publication of *Correspondences*, Anne Michaels's elegy for her father and the European generation to which he belonged. *Correspondences* is a book-length poem, published in accordion format; the poem occupies one side and, on the other, are twenty-six gouache portraits of many of the figures referred to in the poem. Painted by Toronto artist Bernice Eisenstein, these include, among others, Paul Celan, Anna Akhmatova, Nelly Sachs, Charlotte Salomon, W. G. Sebald, Nadezhda and Osip Mandelstam, Primo Levi and Albert Camus. The genre of elegy can offer a valuable paradox; in Hermann Hesse's words, 'Every man is not only himself; he is also the unique, particular, always significant and remarkable point where the phenomena of the world intersect, once and for all and never again.' Talking about the poem one day over a coffee, we realized that there were issues pertaining to the book and to the topic of elegy in general (time, loss, silence, consolation) that we wanted to discuss in some depth; hence the interview.

SS: I was surprised when I heard that you had a new book of poetry coming out. Since *Skin Divers* appeared in 1999 you have concentrated on fiction. What set in motion the writing of *Correspondences*, a book-long elegy for your father?

AM: I began writing *Correspondences* after my father died and what I was attempting in this elegy brought me back to thinking about the poets Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs and several others. Few poets have been as intimately and viscerally engaged as Celan and Sachs with the problematic relationship between language and death. Many years ago, as far back as the early 1980's, I began to think about the first meeting between Celan and Sachs, at the Stork Inn on the Limmat River, in Zurich: what occurred, what was said. They had corresponded for some time before they met in May 1960, and continued to write to each other for the rest of their lives. Although they met only twice, what they meant to each other was pro-

found. Early in their correspondence, they began to address each other as ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’ Only in the specific space of their correspondence did each find a place of no exile. For each, language was a source of salvation and despair. Both Celan and Sachs experienced intermittent breakdowns; and both knew that the despair—and in Sachs’s case, her terror—was an appropriate response to the historical events they had witnessed; and yet they also knew that despair was unforgivable because they had a task: to find meaning in the meaninglessness of those events.

What could their conversation have been that day? I imagine a great deal of silence. Both referred later in their letters to a shared, almost revelatory, experience of seeing light reflected on the water from the windows of the cathedral across the river. There had been some kind of benediction in sharing that sight. Faith in language, and the loss of that faith, is a question I have been thinking about for years. We ache to give expression to events that are inexpressible, or to bear witness to inner events and experience that otherwise remain invisible and silent. And when one’s territory is history, language becomes a responsibility to the dead.

SS: This is the specific landscape of elegy and one its justifications. It testifies to our inevitable engagement with others and with our anguished awareness of our own mortality.

AM: Our love for the dead, of course, moves us to speak, and to learn to live more wisely, with a deepened consciousness, a deepened sense of the world. But language only succeeds through its inevitable failure, its striving and imperfection. The inability of language to recreate experience fully contains this very ache: the discrepancy between experience and expression that is the very essence of mutability. When my father died, I knew it was time to write about Celan and Sachs; and I also knew what form this would take, a book-length poem, in the hope of containing silence in the way only poetry can contain it—absolutely intrinsic. In a poem there can exist a profound silence that is also speech. I wanted to witness my father’s life in a very specific way—not biographically, but by naming a particular intellectual and historical context, to witness a certain inner life and inner conversation: to preserve his particular engagement with what he read, what he listened to, artists he admired and with whom he had an inner dialogue through their work; his moral aspirations; his way of loving; his way of being in the world. To witness and document the ideas and ideals by which someone lives, that compass which is often invisible, is perhaps one of the deepest kinds of portraits one can paint of another human being. This was my impulse—to leave a trace of that inner world, and to make a place for that inner world among those whose work he

understood so deeply, as if they too would understand him. The thought of giving him solace was a solace to me.

SS: The poem includes allusions to and quotations from many historical individuals other than Sachs and Celan, and there are also over two dozen portraits by Bernice Eisenstein. Among them are Bruno Schulz, Jean Améry, Anna Akhmatova and Charlotte Salomon. How did the two of you decide on these individuals and this form?

AM: When Bernice and I first began to talk about the book, it was clear that the gathering together of these figures, these portraits, could also express this particular context, this particular web of historical event and moral enquiry, and we both felt that the portraits and quotations could form a conversation with one another and with the poem. The biographical notes I wrote for the end-papers also become part of this conversation. When Bernice and I first sat down together it was evident we both found the form of the accordion compelling. The poem begins and ends with the same words; the accordion supports the structure of the poem. It was hoped that these figures, in philosophic agreement or disagreement, in accord or in debate, no matter what language was spoken, would derive a specific kind of shelter in each other's company. Many are well known; their fame did not prevent them from joining us. Others are not as well known, others barely known at all. The poem imagines a chair at this table for the orphaned child—a chair piled high with books so she can reach the table and be part of this company and this discussion, where she belongs. The portraits would reflect what I had been thinking about: the question of faith and despair in language; Sachs and Celan; the difficulty or perhaps impossibility of bearing witness to a life and to an historical era; the deeper purpose of an elegy.

In the simplest sense, the book is an elegy not only for my father but for a particular context of enquiry and conversation born from particular historical events. And it is an imagined conversation among various figures who, each in their own way, bore witness to these events—artists, scientists, thinkers, such as Mandelstam, Camus, Einstein, Sebald, and Helen Keller. It is not a single biographical statement, but a web of aspirations and losses, a way of seeing and living. We all belong to our times and the conversation of our times. In my father's case, he could only be known deeply in relation to the conversation of his time. He is in the company of men and women whose work he was either grateful for or, I imagine, would have been grateful for had he known it. They inhabited a historical landscape he knew intimately. In a philosophical and moral sense, their concerns were his. But most importantly, by being at the table with them,

he represents the millions we will never hear from, who lived and mourned deeply, who are not remembered in any public sphere, who lived profoundly meaningful and influential lives, even if only among the few who knew them well. And thus the book also hopes to remember and honour those who had no chance to give expression to their thoughts and feelings, those whose lives were interrupted by events.

SS: These are also concerns in your earlier poems, some of which are elegies, and in *Fugitive Pieces* and *The Winter Vault*. But in form and style, this book is a clear departure. It is written in a more terse, compact, lapidary and minimalist style than your earlier poems. The diction and syntax are as simple and precise as what we find on an epitaph in *The Greek Anthology*. Characters are often evoked with one or two details like your father's cloth cap. There are very few descriptive details and there is a corresponding emotional restraint both in the personal and the historical aspects. There is also none of the figurative power and amplitude of 'What the Light Teaches' and 'The Passionate World.' You are much closer to the runic quality and restraint of Celan's well-known 'Zürich, zum Storchen,' the poem about the long-delayed meeting with Sachs. The restrained palette of the words and colours lends the book a melancholy patina and grace that are also present in the portraits. The portraits, by the way, seem to belong in style more to your father's era than ours; they seem to have been weathered by time.

AM: The use of language is central to the meaning of this book. What language do we have for talking about the dead, what language do we have for death? Of course we've always had the language and rhetoric of the Bible and of formal sermons and eulogies, but I'm not sure these serve us now as they might have in the past. What I wanted to attempt was an absolute simplicity of language—the simplest language I could find in myself—for that which is simultaneously ineffable and commonplace, unknowable and ordinary. How can language embrace this union? For me, the barest language, an almost rudimentary expression, seemed the only way forward. To take everything away and see what is left.

SS: Wittgenstein makes the troubling point that our own death is not an event in our lives because we can't know or describe it. When Robert Lowell writes, in 'Mr Edwards and the Spider,' 'This is death. / To die and know it. This is the Black Widow, death' the second sentence only makes sense to us while we are reading the poem but not, I think, when we try to imagine our own death. Turgenev catches some of our exasperation with the topic in *Fathers and Sons* when a character insists, 'Just try and set death aside. It sets you aside, and that's the end of it.'

AM: Because death is obviously beyond our knowledge, we must choose how to think and talk about it. And this is where language becomes especially inadequate. In one instance, the poem comes down to two small words on a page. This was difficult for me: can two words carry the entire poem that surrounds them, carry meaning without irony, allusion or cliché? Can two words be this celibate, this cleansed of reference?

SS: Reading the shorter stanzas I often had the impression that I was reading a classical epitaph, that the words on the white paper could easily be carved into stone to be one with the subject being addressed. Both the page and the stone slab give the words a special setting, designate them as different in meaning and mood than when they appear in more mundane contexts. They are also of course a gift for the dead being held in trust by you.

AM: For most of the men and women gathered in this book language is a torment, a solace, a rescue, a particular silence, a responsibility: it changes nothing, it changes everything. Whether it is achieved with words or paint or mathematical formulae or music, for these men and women the act of committing one's voice is one of desperation and hope. Each cast himself, herself, into a language, hoping it would not be a fall into emptiness. It is a question to consider: If we lose our faith in language, does language lose its faith in us?

SS: Heidegger's philosophy hangs on that sort of question, as Celan and René Char, both of whom visited him after the war, sensed. A culture can become unworthy of poetry, incapable of summoning its being in and through language. Celan, like Rilke, fascinated Heidegger because he was an exception to poetry's death fugue in the twentieth century. And Celan was particularly attracted by Heidegger's notion of the 'lichtung' or clearing, in which being might appear, or which was the precondition for its appearance. Poetry written at a certain pitch could facilitate that appearance.

AM: It's a good question—to wonder whether meaning continues to exist beyond our belief in it.

SS: Do the gods continue to exist if we cease to believe and abandon the temples? Let's turn to the book as a whole. The point of departure is the dedication 'in memoriam to Isaiah Michaels.' I don't think that it would be a mistake to assume that without your father's death, or if he had died in your childhood, the book would not exist. As it is, we have an elegy for a particular life that is, as you said, linked to other lives coextensive with it. Stanza by stanza it becomes a portrait of a generation and a historical era. One of the aspects I find particularly interesting is that this book in mem-

ory of your father is written at a time when there are fewer and fewer people alive who have a lived memory of the era of the Second World War. A generation from now, this era will be remembered only through photographs, films and texts. The writers will be the survivors of the survivors, and they will have only an indirect experience of the era. Graf Harry Kessler, who died in 1937, captures this anomalous placement in his *Diary* when he describes the dead as ‘embedded in a world for ever lost.’

AM: The point of departure for the book was the death of my father, but my books have always been, among other things, concerned with two premises: *that there is nothing a man will not do to another, nothing a man will not do for another; and what does love make us capable of, and incapable of?* My father’s death brought to a focus certain things I had been thinking about for a long time. But now I felt a change in consciousness; when someone we love dies, we love even more, not less. Just as when we have children, otherwise hidden perceptions expand and heighten; what we know, what we sense and feel, an intuition, becomes enlarged, deepened. When we die, our virtual affinities vanish, a unique wisdom comes to an end. When we die, the whole cloth comes down—cutlery, plates and glasses—though the table of history remains, to be set again.

SS: What fascinated me in this aspect of the poem is the suggestion—which we all understand but rarely speak about to each other—that in a deep sense our dead continue to live through us. I have never met anyone who has denied carrying on a conversation with someone loved for at least a few years after their death even if the conversation takes the silent form of ‘She would have liked that lipstick’s shade of red.’

AM: Elegy is a conversation that continues after a death. Colette said, when her mother died, ‘Just because someone dies, you don’t stop writing them letters.’

SS: I would make the same point about the poems whose authors, though strangers, seem closer to us than some of our friends and family. We read a poem like ‘Zürich, zum Storchen’ and we *feel* the presence of the meeting in May 1960. The closing words leave a huge question hanging over the conversation: ‘We / don’t (really) know, you know (?), / we don’t (really) know, / what’s / worth.’ Celan’s need to know and to understand drove him to an equally well-known visit to Heidegger in July 1967 even though he was initially reluctant to be photographed or to be seen in public with him. According to Heidegger’s biographer, there is no detailed record of what was said when they finally met at the philosopher’s cabin at Todtnauberg, though Celan seemed satisfied by his reception by Heidegger who admired his poetry and even made sure that the local bookstores

featured it in their windows during his stay. They were planning a trip through Hölderlein country at the time of Celan's suicide on April 20, 1970.

AM: After the war, for the rest of his life, Celan had a tortured relationship with the German language. His home was in language, and that language had been mutilated for him. Yet that very mutilation was now part of its meaning. Writing for him was both necessary and unbearable. Adorno famously said, there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. This has been interpreted in various ways; that beauty is no longer possible, that to make beauty after atrocity is unconscionable, that to make beauty out of such despair is unconscionable. But I choose to believe it was also an appeal to a kind of silence, the same moment of silence we uphold at a funeral. Grief takes time. Later, there is the necessity of speaking, even though the necessary words may be unavailable. The first step beyond this is the meticulous gathering of facts. We must proceed from fact; we cannot deduce from abstraction. Meaning arises from fact. And sometimes even invisible actions leave a trace. There is a kind of activism that is invisible—acts of good that often remain unknown at the time and come to light only later. I think increasingly about such 'invisible' activism, especially during war-time. And of the force of even abject longing, as in the case of Celan and Sachs who, in giving something to each other, made room next to them at the table for others.

SS: In your novels and in *Correspondences*, this is evident in the way that you return to the 'embedded' word or object, something tangible as document, artifact, fragment or memory. This is something that isn't merely a caprice of subjectivity but partakes of the gravitas and resonance of the historical and symbolic.

AM: I want to make a distinction here between the subjective and the personal. Subjectivity is dubious whereas the genuinely personal is not. Small personal details can magnify. The cloth cap, a shoe, a painting are real. They precede our interpretations and will survive them. Whether it is my father's cap or the cap on a child's head in a photograph. Whether it is a pair of shoes beside a bed, or the heap of shoes in a museum left by the dead. This kind of detail is undeniable and embodies a poignant truth. There is another point to be made about the subjective and the personal when writing about historical events in fiction. For me, there is a moral question involved. Writing subjectively where history is concerned encourages the danger that a reader will be able to distance himself, to abdicate the responsibility of thinking about certain events; the reader can say to himself, 'that's *his* story, that's *her* story, of course this interests and

concerns him.’ Instead, one would wish a reader to say, ‘This story concerns me, these moral questions are my moral questions, these characters and these experiences are also, in some fundamental way, mine.’

SS: When you put it that way, you remind me that elegy is the perhaps the ideal genre to deal with the full arc of our lives from birth to death with all the bus stops between and the unanswerable questions about the meaning of our lives and what we leave behind. Among its many suggestions *Correspondences* reminds us that ‘We / don’t (really) know’ who we are (or were) because we can’t know the full tessera of influences, relationships and meaningful accidents that constitute the final form our lives will take. And that form resembles death in that we can never know it.

AM: I would say that this form resembles life, not death. That we are made of gratitudes and grief; and sometimes, through love, only through love, do we leave our trace in another.

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