CRITICAL HORIZONS, 2018
https://doi.org/10.1080/14409917.2018.1453289

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Check for updates

The Historico-poetic Materialism of Benjamin and Celan

Shannon Hayes

Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR, USA

ABSTRACT

This article explores the relationship between the historical materialism of Walter Benjamin and the poetics of Paul Celan, and claims that within Celan's poetics, we find a form for thinking Benjamin's Marxism beyond Benjamin. The driving force of Benjamin's critique of historicism is the desire to free Marx's ideas (class struggle, classless society, progress) from the empty time of progress. By attending to the "breathturns" at the heart of Celan's, *The Meridian,* this article uncovers a poetic historiography grounded in Benjamin's now-time. It is with this conception of history that Marx's ideas can be reimagined as a historico-poetic materialism and reinvigorated with revolutionary force.

KEYWORDS

Historical materialism; Walter Benjamin; Paul Celan; poetry; historiography

"Every presentation of history", writes Walter Benjamin, must "begin with an awakening".[1] "Awakening" is an event that ties the past epoch to the present, superseding the distance that lies between historical moments. Regarding his own work of materialist historiography, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin claims that it "treats an awakening from the nineteenth century".[2] There we find the attempt to preserve the fragments of awakening through their transformation into something legible, what Benjamin refers to as "dialectical images". It is the task of this essay to show that Paul Celan's poetological treatise, *The Meridian,* is also a presentation of history. In this speech, given on the occasion of receiving the Georg-Büchner Prize in 1960, Celan attends to the dialectical images that Georg Büchner himself left in the plays that constitute the work of his brief life. By tracing these moments of awakening which are, for Celan, "breathturns", I argue that Celan is providing a form for thinking Benjamin's Marxism beyond Benjamin. In this essay, I draw on the historical materialism of Walter Benjamin and the poetics of Paul Celan as a way of giving *shape* to Benjamin's Marxist project and *direction* to Celan's. While I find in Celan's conception of poetry as a breathturn a resource for giving shape and flesh to Benjamin's dialectical images, Benjamin's historical materialism provides the methodological support necessary to endow poetry with a direction that is revolutionary and messianic.

Although the relationship between Celan and Martin Heidegger is well-established as a rich point of engagement between poet and philosopher,[3] in this paper, I hope to show that another productive conversation emerges through consideration of Celan and Benjamin, and of the poem as tasked with the construction of breathturns: small breaks in the

CONTACT Shannon Hayes shannonh@uoregon.edu
© Critical Horizons Pty Ltd 2018

continuity of time. As a breathturn, poetry can be the site of an awakening that is not only personal but collective; it can be the site of an experience that is realised across the generations which have between them a "secret agreement".

In the first section, I elaborate Benjamin's historical materialism through the critique of historicism in "On the Concept of History". I frame Benjamin's project as one that aims to redeem the force of Marx's ideas through the revolutionary experience produced in the construction of dialectical images. In the second section, I present Celan as standing in a redemptive relation to Benjamin, and the poem as capable of redeeming the force of Benjamin's ideas in the present. By attending to the breathturns of *The Meridian*, I show that there is between them a movement of awakening and I interpret this as a movement of progress in poetic historiography.

Walter Benjamin's historical materialism

Much has been written on the heterodoxical way Benjamin read Marx and took up a Marxist project in his own work. In lieu of claiming that Benjamin either did not understand Marx well enough, or understood him too well, allowing the quality of his thought to suffer in consequence, I suggest that we imagine Benjamin approaching Marx with the "cautious detachment" that befits a historical materialist in relation to inherited "cultural treasures".[4] As Benjamin famously states in Thesis VII, "there is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism",[5] and not even Marx is immune to the barbarism that subtends the process of his texts's transmission. The question of his relation to Marx points to a broader question of nearness and distance which concerned Benjamin and which we will have to consider in relation to Celan: how do we locate ourselves in relation to the traditions that we inherit? With Celan, we can incorporate the language of "breath" and ask how we can open a breathroute between the past and present such that we can, in the present, give shape to the meaning and direction expressed in the historical object. Benjamin approaches Marx with a critical eye intending to both conserve the truth that Marx's theoretical armature preserves, namely, the anonymous suffering that subtends capitalist development,[6] and disrupt the theoretical armature that makes invisible the suffering that it preserves. Benjamin's project is redemptive,[7] both of Marx's ideas and of the memory of the anonymous.

In the paralipomena to "On the Concept of History" we find Benjamin's clearest formulation of his way of approaching Marx. Benjamin identifies "three basic concepts" in Marx: class struggle, progress, and the classless society. Marx's philosophy of history, as described by Benjamin, consists of a welding together of these concepts in narratival form (what Benjamin calls Marx's theoretical armature). A story of labour's dominion under capital can then be told as the following: "through a series of class struggles, humanity attains to a classless society in the course of historical development".[8] Although Marx's theoretical armature was intended only as a provisional construction, as is well-known, Marx's epigones then naturalised "the broad steel framework" of *Capital* and codified Marx's secular millenarianism.[9] As a result, the basic concepts of class struggle, progress, and classless society appear as provisional, while the course of history, driven by the impersonal forces of the economic base, appears as dominant and eternal. History came to be identified with the locomotive, progressing according to the "empty, homogenous time" marked by the train's mechanical rhythm.[10]

Ossified, Marx's three basic concepts become newly signified. *Progress* comes to be understood as a cumulative and incremental advance of world history towards a desired future. *Classless society,* which Benjamin richly describes as Marx's secularised "idea of messianic time",[11] is dislocated from the present and located at the end, as its goal. As a regulative ideal, it gives meaning and direction to the historical process. *Class struggle* now occurs in a present which has been stripped of messianic time and turned into an "anteroom" of history. Given that it occurs on the site in which "one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity",[12] class struggle is stripped of its revolutionary force, and reduced to a struggle that emerges out of immediate, material concerns.[13] Class struggle is transformed into an "infinite task", and as Celan might say, it takes the form of an "infinite conversation".[14]

One of the tasks of Benjamin's *Theses* is to provide the schematics for a materialist presentation of history in which Marx's main ideas are disentangled from the vulgar-Marxist conception of history. By doing so, the revolutionary force of these ideas can be reoriented towards the pursuit of human interests and away from the world-historical interests that he sees them as serving. It is towards the redemption of the "destructive energies" of class struggle, classless society, and progress that Benjamin introduces his critique of historicism: the mode of articulating the past that is co-extensive with the defeatism and quietism inaugurated by the Second International theorists. Despite its pretensions, Benjamin charges historicism with approaching the past from the perspective of history's victors. In order to revolutionise Marx's ideas, they must instead return to a presentation of history which is not constructed on the prophetic time of millenarianism but on the now-time of messianism. In other words, they must again become active forces of the present.

The historicist begins with a conception of history that occurs upon a linear, temporal continuum, across which the basic units of time are essentially the same: "empty" and "homogenous". Between the distance that separates the past from the present a narrative as a chain of causal relations can be drawn, connecting even the most distant times to the present. The historicist intends to approach the past *scientifically*, as a disinterested observer, and suspends anachronistic judgments in order to glimpse the true nature of a given time. Benjamin is highly critical of the disinterestedness of the historicist for two reasons. First, the historicist historiography is motivated by a feeling of apathy with the present (*acedia*)[15] and, in order to supplement the present with the meaning and direction it lacks, it empathises with past times and finds only its own reflection in everything it touches. Second, in order to re-animate the past, the historicist attends to the documents and artefacts that have survived and takes these to be more real than what has disappeared, namely, the anonymous lives whose suffering made possible the production of the period's lauded works. Historicism privileges the present over the past and presence over absence.

The true, materialist historian begins with a conception of history as a palimpsest composed of discontinuous images. As a palimpsest, history does not culminate in the present; rather, the present is predicated on the erasure of previous presents which can be felt as its own hollowness. The present is precariously situated between two silences and filled with now-time: the messianic time of action. Disinterested in cultural artefacts, the materialist historian turns toward the echoes and silences of the past that saturate the present. "Doesn't a breath of air that invaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear," Benjamin asks, "isn't there an echo of now silent ones?" If so, "then there is a

secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming has been expected on earth".[16] The true image is a dialectical image, the construction of which is at the heart of *The Arcades Project*'s methodology.[17] Such an image forms between the discontinuous images of what-has-been and the present a constellation: a fleeting image of the "secret agreement" that exists between the past and present generations, between their breath and our own. Importantly, this image is experienced. Like a flash of lightning, it signals a moment of awakening, a recognition of the Now as shot through with slivers of messianic fulfilled time, which interrupts the continuum of empty, historical time.[18] This is what Celan will call "poetry".

Both modes of approaching the past seek a self-encounter. The historicist seeks a self-encounter from the perspective of the present, which is increasingly divested of its self-coherence. The true historian does not seek to overcome the increasing fragmentation. Rather, the fragmented character of the present, which the Second International theorists sought to overcome, is what is to be encountered. By turning towards the past as something that is radically other, which has left a message for the present that could not have been written, an encounter with the present as a moment in crisis becomes possible. By taking the longer route through the other of the past, the present can encounter itself as a critical moment while being inspired by the breath of the past, filled with its unarticulated intentions.

The historical materialist "wishes to hold the true image of the past as it appears in a moment of danger". How should we understand this "holding"? First, it requires the maintenance of a tension – one not to be resolved either by petrifying the true image, or by breathing the air of the present into the past to re-animate it. As Max Pensky writes, Benjamin's dialectical images maintain "an intractable amount of undecidability" with regard to both the historical object and historical subject. He concludes that Benjamin's refusal to resolve the opposition between object and subject leaves us with a quixotic inheritance: a "frozen dialectic" which "places severe limits on our ability, in the present, to think with Benjamin beyond Benjamin".[19] Instead of regarding the frozen image as a deficit, I suggest an interpretation of the tension between what-has-been and the present as a way of opening a specific kind of route – between the present and past, and between self and other – one through which the breath of the past opens itself to the present and the present opens itself to the past: a kind of breathroute.[20] This is not an image of resuscitating the past and bringing it back to life – "few will suspect how sad one had to be to undertake the resuscitation of Carthage"[21] – it is a breath circuit through which the past inspires the present with "breath" – what Celan characterises as "meaning and direction" – and the present endows the breath with presence and shape. To hold the true image of the past is to hold this constellation connecting the present to the past inside of oneself; to not speak it but to speak from it, like a calendar date from which we write ourselves.[22] Neither static nor timeless, a dialectical image may appear frozen, but as we will see with Celan, this frozen image opens up a path to be followed with one's life; it is an imperative.

We should understand the normative force of Benjamin's dialectical images as attempting to supplant that which is missing in the present. The disappearance of moral authority is an effect of the decay of human experience that Benjamin traces in "The Storyteller" alongside the development of the capitalist process of production. In the penultimate letter to Theodor Adorno in 1940, Benjamin writes that his "theory of experience" emerged from a childhood memory. "After we had visited one of the obligatory tourist

attractions [during family vacations] my brother used to say, 'Now we can say that we've been there.' This statement made an unforgettable impression on me".[23] No longer leading to the production of something socially useful, we are satisfied in merely relaying the face of "having been there".

Through this process of decay, which is characterised as the increasing alienation of meaning from the events of one's life, we become silent. This silencing first becomes apparent after the First World War. Benjamin notes that the experiences had by the soldiers on the battlefield so contradicted the value of human life that they returned home without the ability to communicate their experiences and "grew silent". Regarding what occurred on the battlefield, Benjamin writes, "Never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power."[24] To say that silence emerged out of the contradictions between the events of human life and the meaning or value of human life during the First World War is not to say that people did not talk about the war, as the torrent of analyses that followed the war can attest. Rather, like the events of the war itself, the words used to describe the events were hollowed-out of human meaning. There was nothing "moral" to share, no practical advice to be drawn from visits to these "faraway lands". There was no longer the meaning necessary to share the kinds of experiences that go "from mouth to mouth".[25] The profusion of intellectual analyses that followed the First World War echoes the situation that Benjamin found dramatically represented in the German *Trauerspiels* (mourning-plays) of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the face of the increasing secularisation of world history, the dialogue of the Baroque plays is best characterised as "mournful". They often expressed the desire to revive the dead world that had been hollowed-out of meaning by representing it through excessive feeling and prolixity so that the words would come to hide the emptiness like a mask.[26] Although the one who mourns the world speaks, "in all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness".[27] Insofar as the words are "fallen" and no longer call into being what they name, they are stripped of their force and urgency. Similar to what we find in the aftermath of the "crisis of Marxism" wherein theory and practice are alienated from one another, hollowed-out words no longer have the force of an imperative; they accumulate but they do not progress.

Benjamin notes that this process of decomposition appeared after the First World War and we can add that the completion of this process appears after the Second World War. Although human meaning was "contradicted" by the events on the battlefields of the First World War, it was, during the Holocaust, annihilated, and human experience was rendered impossible. It is from out of the ashes of human experience that Paul Celan enters. Whereas the soldiers Benjamin describes as returning from the war "grew silent", Celan refers to the Holocaust as the "terrifying falling silent". It is out of the silences of the Holocaust that Celan writes. These silences are to be differentiated from the silences that Benjamin drew from in the following way: whereas Benjamin approached the silences of the past inspired by a hope that world history might one day become a truly human history, Celan approaches the silences of the past aware of the impossibility of such a confluence.

Benjamin's dialectical images have become, for Celan, breathcrystals. A breathcrystal is a ruin of breath, a sign of the "morbid breathlessness" that defines the fate of the human

being in the context of world history.[28] Salminen interprets the morbidity of the breathcrystal in relation to the Zyklon-B pesticide used in the gas chambers of the extermination camps. "The crystal of breath is", he writes, "the crystal of death, the sign of the last inhalation".[29] While I agree that the breathcrystal is a sign of the last inhalation, to regard the breathcrystal as merely something that has been determined by external historical forces is to reinscribe the dehumanisation of an anonymous death. In death, the individual remains at the breathturn which was, in life, a gap to be leapt over. In the breathcrystal the breathturn has become crystallised and made legible. And thus, death is entwined with the mark of a person's breath: the meaning and direction of their life. Although it is a sign of death, there is also something hopeful in the image of the breathcrystal. In the poem "Eroded" from *Atemwende* (breathturn), Celan ascribes to breathcrystals a latent potency:

> Deep
> in Time's crevasse
> by
> the alveolate ice
> waits, a crystal of breath,
> your irreversible
> witness.[30]

In one sense, a breathcrystal is the most alienated way of expressing our "having been there" – entirely unhinged from language, the world, and the continuation of our own lives. And yet, it is a singular expression that we throw ahead of ourselves, that remains when we no longer have language, the world, or our survival. It does not interrupt the continuum of historical time, but it is hostile to it, an indication of a direction that would travel outside of its progression. In a letter to his wife, Gisele, whose drawings of breathcrystals served as an inspiration, he writes, "I have seen your etchings being born next to my poems, being born of those very poems, and you know well that '*Atemkristall*/breathcrystal,' which has reopened the path of poetry for me, was born from your etchings".[31] Like Benjamin's dialectical images, a breathcrystal is a frozen image, and like it too, it opens up a path; it is an imperative.

Paul Celan's poetic historiography

In the following sections on Paul Celan's *The Meridian*, I emphasise Celan's account of two of Georg Büchner's plays – *Danton's Death* and *Lenz* – which are both literary accounts of historical figures and events. *Danton's Death* dramatically represents the last days of George Danton and the other revolutionaries who opposed Robespierre and the Reign of Terror. Danton, Camille, and his wife Lucille are historical figures whose lives and deaths in 1794 are well-documented. In *Lenz*, Büchner draws on a diary documenting the life of Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, a literary friend of Goethe whose body was found "in the night of 23 to 24 May, 1792 … lifeless in a Moscow street".[32] To traverse Büchner's art with Celan is a way of traversing both the lifework of Büchner, and a particular path of world history. Like history from the perspective of the historicist, art seems to trace a linear progression across a temporal continuum. Art, Celan tells us, is "the subject of a conversation that, we sense, could be continued indefinitely, if nothing

interfered".[33] But "something does interfere" namely, poetry. The poetic interrupts the historical conversation and its infinite progression. As an interruption, it opens something up, conjuring the presence of the person as the subject of a conversation that is not historical, but immemorial. Whereas Büchner's art travels the route of history, poetry travels the route of art travelling the route of history. "I know, there are other, shorter routes," Celan tells us, "But poetry too does hurry ahead of us at times".[34] As a poet, Celan presents himself as going further – attending not only to the historical figures and Büchner's literary figures, but to their poetic figures. "I believe I met poetry with Lucille," he writes, "and [in Büchner's Lenz] I search for the same, I search for Lenz himself, I search for him – as a person, I search for his shape".[35]

Celan begins *The Meridian* by identifying the three forms of art that appear across the lifework of Büchner: art appears as a puppet, a creature, and an automaton. Each appearance, we learn, presents an image of one who is out of control of the conditions of his or her life and death. Although art takes on different forms, every time it appears, we are told it is the same art. It also has the "gift of ubiquity".[36] Thus art is capable of returning every time and everywhere. Celan writes that it is a "mutable, tough, and long-lived, I want to say, an eternal problem".[37] To say that art is an eternal problem is not to say that as a problem art is timeless – free from historical determination and decomposition – but rather that it is congruent with the problem of the eternal, that is, of the eternal appearance of history, of its frozen, timeless forms, and of the subject's fixed relation to it. Art does not destroy life, it preserves life and transforms it into something that can be seen by others and shared. "One wishes one were a Medusa's head," Lenz claims, so that one might turn a natural scene to stone "and call everybody over to have a look".[38] It holds life in a state of suspension and crystallises it. Benjamin describes the life in a work of art as "quivering … petrified … as if spellbound in a single moment". It is not really alive as the life is determined by those who would guide the puppet's strings and coerce the monkey to perform for the crowd; but neither is it subject to the process of worldly decomposition and allowed to die. It is this "quivering life" that constitutes its beauty and its appeal to the masses.

Every discussion of art is counterpoised by a hostility to art that concerns both its content and how it depicts in its content. The images of art that Celan identifies in Büchner's plays represent the despair of historical experience in which life appears powerless in relation to the historical determination. Although preserving the experience of one who suffers his or her fate, art keeps it at a distance; it makes it unrecognisable. As Celan writes, "He who has art before his eyes and on his mind … forgets himself. Art creates I-distance".[39] The observer forgets himself – the self whose life is, like the monkey's, coerced and constrained by the ruling forces of the present. As Celan reminds us, "It is so easy to speak about art," and we add, it is so difficult to recognise in the art the eternal problem that concerns us still. This distance makes it easy to talk about art, but difficult to remember that what art preserves is something that concerns us. The despair represented in art's images is not complete, but open. Danton's fate does not end on the scaffold, it extends to the present as one of our own possibilities. Just as it is the same art that returns each time, it is also the same historical fate – mutable and with the gift of ubiquity.

Like Benjamin, Celan is looking for the true image of art, one that is not an object, fixed and enduring, but a direction and an imperative. The true image is an aberration; it is the

breath that escapes the representation and is even "in the air we breathe today". Whereas Benjamin's true image is a dialectical image which opens a breathroute between the present and past, Celan's true image is poetry. Poetry ruptures art's frozen representation and opens a breathroute "from you to you"; this is a route across which the I can travel undetermined by the impersonal forces of world history. Art depicts breath that travels the route of history: the route across which the individual hopes to survive. Continually put into question by the social and economic constraints that characterise a given present, life across this route appears from the perspective of the present as a sequence of moves and countermoves. By the strength of these moves, the game can be prolonged, but it cannot affect the outcome; no individual is in control of their fate. Like a Medusa's head, art turns the natural scene to stone, transforming a moment of survival into a spectacle for others. In doing so, it conceals and preserves the individual life that "quivers" in the frozen image. Poetry travels the way of art, but it is not concerned with survival; poetry is an interruption of art and the concern for survival. It can be a breathturn: an interruption and a clearing, out of which the "I", no longer the quivering life concealed by the anonymous "one" of its historical fate, can be brought to presence, made visible and audible.

Of course, poetry *is* art, but it is art that is self-estranged, art that has turned against itself and has pierced its own image. It is not art without fate, but art that has become full of fate: a breath of air that has escaped the frozen representation. No longer determined by the historical scene, the breath that was once concealed now expresses a direction that could not be taken by the individual in her own present. What has opened up in art is both a "narrow" and an imperative, the truth of which depends on its being followed. Poetry impels: "you have to go through here with your life".[40] This path which opens up from within art is a breathroute, and it is along this that the poem travels. That the poem progresses along this narrow route is not due to the advancement of poetry's tools and techniques, but reflects the attentiveness of the poem – it is a product of the "listening and obeying" that the poem learns through listening to the silences of those it addresses.[41] By travelling this way, the poet finds, in the poetic rupture of an other I, a path through which meaning and direction is in-formed: given shape and made flesh.

Paul Celan's breathturns

In the notes to *The Meridian*, Celan writes, "I had survived some things – but survival hopefully isn't 'everything' … I was searching for – maybe I can call it that? – my breathturn".[42] Between inhalation and exhalation, the breathturn is the breathlessness at the heart of breath. It is not a place but a gap or fissure that breath leaps over to continue itself. For Celan to write that he is searching for his breathturn is not to say that he is looking to be without breath, although that is always a risk. Rather, he is looking to be without the false breath that inspires him with life that is not his own. From out of this false breath we may still speak very artful words, but we do not speak ourselves. The breathturn faces you with silence, but "it still gives you a chance". It takes away your false breath and then gives you the chance to speak yourself. To speak from here is to make the I in its radical singularity fully present: it is poetry.

Through the course of *The Meridian,* Celan traces the breathturns he finds across the works of Büchner. Each reflects a break in the continuum of historical time and opens up a

narrow across which the poem travels. The first breathturn occurs at the end of *Danton's Death* and belongs to Lucille. After witnessing the hanging death of her husband, Lucille is confronted with the choice between life and death. In order to live, it was necessary for her to remain silent; survival would have required resigning herself to the motor of history. An expression of solidarity with the hanged revolutionaries, the ones with whom she inhabited the same position in life, would have resulted in her hanging and sharing the same fate as the others. Instead, Büchner writes Lucille a phrase that disrupts the dramatic representation. Refusing the choice she is confronted with – between the yes or no of life or death – Lucille exclaims "Long live the king!" With these absurd words, which interrupt the historical narrative, we are, for a moment, in "the presence of the human".[43]– This is Lucille's "I" – as she is, herself – estranged from the anonymous "one" she becomes under the gaze of history.

It is as if Lucille had a view of history from a distance, as if she could see it as one continuous movement. Like Benjamin's angel of history, the "chain of events that appear before *us*" as the course of historical development, appear to Lucille as "one single catastrophe".[44] From the perspective of the present, history may appear to be guided by a rational conception of progress tending towards the actualisation of human ends. But with some (absurd) distance, history reveals itself to be dragged ahead by a "storm of progress" – the impersonal and irrational forces of world history whose lack of concern for the human is manifest in the ruinous state with which it departs from every present which is "already no-longer". These revolutionaries will not change the direction of world history, but are its newest extension: "All rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors".

We can situate Lucille's breathturn in an image which opens the first thesis of Benjamin's "On the Concept of History". Drawing on a story by Edgar Allen Poe, Benjamin recalls the first chess-playing automaton, "The Turk," that toured the great cities of Europe. The automaton won most of its games due to the strength of its countermoves and, most importantly, due to the "hunchbacked dwarf" who was a "master of chess", and who guided the puppet's strings from under the table. Such an apparatus, Benjamin tells us, is likewise found in historical materialisms that put theology at its service; like the dwarf, theology is "small and ugly and has to be kept out of sight".[45] Historical materialism, like the artful image of George Danton, appears as a puppet – a created being, out of control of its destiny. Although we are told historical materialism is always supposed to win, the true end of the game is perpetually deferred; every win only presages the next game, the next opponent that must be played. The chessboard, made up of identical squares, is the temporal structure on which the events of history will be played out. It is a field of empty time wherein the varied appearance of the pieces obscures the reality that all possible acts are here reduced to two: moves and countermoves. Given that the rules of the game have been decided in advance, the winner – the one who determines the meaning of the game – will be the one with superior strategy: the one who can see further. While theology, in Benjamin's image, is at the service of historical materialism, neither is at the service of humanity, whose future is staked on the puppet winning the game.[46]

We can imagine Lucille here, a pawn who sees history laid out on a chessboard. To the ones watching the game, history appears to be a sequential march towards an uncertain victory. The game has tension, intrigue; the resolution is contingent on the events of the present. At the end, a story will be told about the victor: the one who deftly played

to the end and narrowly escaped death. Another story is left untold – that of the oppressed, of their anonymous suffering and expendable lives, made invisible by the game's sequential march. Lucille is the one who sees what is and what is not yet: both the present configuration and the direction this shape will take. Driven insatiably by the storm of progress, world history leaves in its wake every present in ruins, a pile of debris growing skyward. Attentive to the contingency of her own life in relation to this history, Lucille refuses her complicity in the game, and the false breath that inspires her life. Lucille's "Long live the king!" is her breathturn: neither a move nor a countermove but a word that interrupts the progressive march of history; it is her escape from contingency. Here, we can think of Lucille's "escape from contingency" as a second-order Pascalian wager as articulated by Agnes Heller. While Benjamin's Thesis shows that historical materialism is relying on theology thus substituting eternal salvation for historical salvation, Lucille's word stakes her life on the wager between betting and non-betting. Her absurd word is not indecision but a decision not to bet on the game of world history.[47]

Lucille's breathturn cuts the puppet's strings – and this should be understood as cutting the strings that bind her and the puppet of historical materialism to the course of world history and theology. In the refusal of her complicity with the historical procession she sacrifices her person. But the meaning of her death, unable to be assimilated to either a world historical or theological narrative, gets thrown ahead in her poetic address, which is to no one in her present, but to someone who is altogether alien to the present. Given the poem's absent addressee, we can understand the darkness through which the poem travels, not knowing to "which morrow it is headed", or whether an encounter with the absent one will occur. This darkness similarly defines the direction of historical materialism. No longer tied to the eternal present of the chessboard, it appears instead as Benjamin's angel of history: turned toward the past, with its back to the future into which it is dragged. Although aware of the barbarism that subtends each advance of history, and the catastrophe that defines its truth, historical materialism is guided by the invisible strings of progress's storm.

Celan writes of a second breathturn that occurs in the opening passage of *Lenz* when, on the 20 January, the eponymous protagonist is taking a walk across the mountains. Celan writes that he sees Lenz in this passage; just like Lucille, he sees Lenz as he is, himself when Büchner writes, " … Except sometimes it annoyed him that he could not walk on his head".[48] Before the breathturn, it is difficult to see Lenz. Lenz is described as moving indifferently across the mountain, unaffected by the natural scene unfolding around him. In the face of the mountain, whose sheer magnitude was sufficient to evoke the sublime in his predecessors, Büchner's Lenz appears unimpressed. He has inherited from Lucille his disenchantment; he is aware of the ruse, of the empty time that accumulates without progressing. After the breathturn, Lenz's vague awareness of the world's emptiness becomes a terrifying, abyssal emptiness, as Celan remarks that "he who walks on his head, has the sky beneath him as an abyss".[49] After this thought, Lenz no longer appears passive in relation to the natural scene unfolding around him; he instead wishes he could change the mountain. He would like to set the wet earth behind an oven, to dry it like a piece of formed clay. He wishes to traverse its distances in giant strides in order to avoid the tedium of so many small, repetitive steps.

Celan writes that Lenz's breathturn is Büchner's breathturn and our own. To this we can add that it is the angel of history's breathturn. Like the historicist who reached

toward the past in order to make whole the fragmented present, the angel of history's backwards gaze is mournful; he wishes he could stay so that he could make whole what has been lost, to rewrite the catastrophe that defines the underside of historical progress. Unable to change the past or redirect the course of history, he is instead its witness. Like the historicist, he too sees history from the perspective of the victors for whom catastrophe is a natural and unavoidable product of historical progress and whose attention to suffering is always cut short by its irresistible movement. In contrast to the angel of history, Lenz does not wish to overcome the fragmentation and emptiness of nature, he exacerbates it, imagining its meaninglessness to be so real and tangible that it makes no difference whether he walks on his feet or on his head. Indifferent to natural laws and the storm of progress, Celan remarks that this annoyance is the suicidal desire to have the sky beneath him as an abyss. Like Lucille's counterword such a thought is only sacrificial with respect to the anonymous and impersonal one that Lenz appeared to be under the gaze of nature. Lenz's I remains but is now upside-down, surrounded by darkness. Blindly crawling on his hands, he no longer sees where he came from or where he is headed. No longer dragged by the storm of progress, he does what the angel of history could not: he is turned towards the ruins, which he pays attention to – counting and touching each thing he encounters.

When Büchner writes *Danton's Death* and traces the life of the historical figure, Lucile Desmoulins, he has an encounter with Lucille – as she is, herself – that is, he has an encounter in the present with the meaning of her death. Through the experience of this loss, a breathroute opens up – a narrow path that Büchner follows with Lenz across the mountain. When Celan writes *The Meridian* and traces the lifework of Georg Büchner, he too has an encounter with Büchner: as he is, himself. Through the poem of today, he has an encounter in the present with the meaning of Büchner's death – an event whose occurrence is not the 19 February when, at the age of 23 he dies from typhus, but the 20 January when Lenz takes his walk across the mountain.[50] Büchner's breathturn, which Celan locates in Lenz's desire to walk on his head, is, like Lucille's breathturn, an event that had not yet been recognised. For Celan to experience this event is to fully realise what has been lost, namely, the words which had remained "reachable and not lost" during the Holocaust. With Büchner, Celan finds a date on which language went through its own "terrifying silence". Whereas Lucille's word liberates the I from the historical procession, Lenz's silence cuts the invisible strings that tied the I to its determination by the material conditions of existence: the very ground beneath its feet, the belief in nature's laws, even language.

Conclusion

The task of this essay has been two-fold. First, I claimed that the poetics of Paul Celan provides us with a form for thinking Benjamin's Marxism beyond Benjamin. Second, I claimed that this form is a presentation of history, a poetic historiography that traces the process of the awakening of the I as a revolutionary subject. Regarding the first task, I began by explicating the critique of historicism that Benjamin presents in "On a Concept of History". Benjamin aims his critical gaze at the mortification of historical progress in order to ruin the quietist form of historical materialism reinforced by a historicist historiography. By denaturalising the continuous movement of historical progress, he can

wrest from it the breath that continues its life, and render it subject to the process of worldly decomposition. To redeem the past, Marx's "basic concepts" – progress, class struggle and classless society – must be liberated from the theoretical structure in which they inhered and return to the present historical materialism's "destructive energies".[51]

With the poem of today, Celan shows himself to be not only the "poet of Benjamin" – the one who attempts to produce experience by tracing now-time with attentiveness – but also that he stands in a relation of redemption with Marxism. Celan's poetic historiography aims to redeem the memory of the anonymous that Marx's theoretical structure preserved and kept at a distance. It is in Büchner's text that Celan has an encounter with the historical figure, Lucille – "as she is, herself" – as a unique, singular I no longer concealed by the anonymity of the world-historical narratives in which she had been included. It is in the poem that Celan translates the silence of Lucille's breathturn into something legible, something that can be shared with others. Whereas the storyteller hoped to share the experience of a life with another, the poet hopes to share the experience of a breath – absolutely singular and incomparable – with an altogether other. Although the poet too is engaged in the construction and transmission of collective experience, the poet is hostile to world history which renders human life anonymous and sanctions its extermination. In *The Meridian*, Celan weaves a tradition of the I: a tradition of hostility to the movement of world history comprised of those breaths that represent another path to be taken, one across which the I could travel.

In the poem of today, we glimpse a form in which Marx's basic concepts – class struggle, classless society, and progress – can become unthought and newly signified. *Progress* no longer describes the movement of historical forces, measured by the distances that separate economic, political, or scientific revolutions. Progress describes the process of the awakening of an I from the dream of world history. It is measured in breathturns – encounters in the present with the past's unrecognised events. Experienced in the present, a breathturn constitutes a rupture of the historical continuum that opens a narrow path along which the I can travel. A breathturn is a revolution in breath, that is, a revolution in the meaning and direction of existence. If it is breathturns that are sought, then *class struggle* is no longer to be understood as a tension mediated by immediate material concerns in the present, but as a struggle to experience the unrecognised events of other times that reverberate in the echoes and silences of the present and are at risk of disappearing forever. *Classless society* is not the goal of world history but its end, and this end is to be understood as the full presence of a collective I, which has awoken from the dream of world history.

Notes

1. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 463.
2. Ibid.
3. On the relationship between Celan and Heidegger, see: Lyons, *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger*; Salminen, "Meridian Zero: Nothings of Celan and Heidegger Compared."
4. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV*, 391–2.
5. Ibid., 398.
6. Ibid., 406.
7. I interpret "redemption" in accord with Hamacher, as "a redeeming of possibilities, which are opened with every life and are missed in every life … Each possibility that was missed in the

past remains a possibility for the future, precisely because it has not found fulfillment". In "Now: Walter Benjamin and Historical Time," 39.

8. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV*, 402.
9. On the misstep of Marxist orthodoxies, see: Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle,* 14. Regarding Marx's millenarianism, see: Byrne, "The Victory of the Proletariat is Inevitable," 59–67.
10. As Heller puts it, the construction of *Capital* was undoubtedly influenced by the recent irruption of trains and railway stations into everyday existence, but it was not the physical apparatuses that exerted influence. Rather, the "metaphysical train and metaphysical railway station … became objects of dreams as carriers and manifestations of unconscious wishes and desires." *A Philosophy of History in Fragments*, 217.
11. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV*, 401.
12. Ibid., 402.
13. Ibid., 390.
14. Celan, *The Meridian*, 1.
15. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV*, 391.
16. Ibid., 390.
17. Regarding Benjamin's dialectical images, see Pensky, "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images"; "The Trash of History," 211–39; Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 101–110; *Dialectics of Seeing*, 216–52.
18. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 463.
19. Pensky, "Method and Time," 195.
20. Breathroute' is Celan's phrase. It indicates a path that emerges from out of a breathturn. Like dialectical images, breathturns are constituted through the experience of the past as an event that has yet to be recognized. This experience is a rupture of the historical continuum which bears the possibility of new temporal unfoldings.
21. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV*, 390, fn.10.
22. Dates have an important place in Celan's conception of poetry. As Di Cesare writes, a date "is the event that happens only once and that nevertheless reproduces and indeed multiplies itself in the self-repeating of the calendar; the date is the unrepeatable that repeats itself in the recurrence of the memory and of the anniversary" *Utopia of Understanding*, 192. This dialectic of singularity and repetition inherent in the date indicates that "date" for Celan has a function similar to "origin" for Benjamin which bears the same dialectic. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 46.
23. Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin*, 629.
24. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol III*, 362.
25. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 84.
26. Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama,* 139.
27. Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Vol. I*, 72–3.
28. Celan, *Selected Poem and Prose*, 395.
29. Salminen, "On Breathroutes," 124.
30. Celan, *Breathturn Into Timestead*, 18.
31. From a letter dated "March 29, 1965," and included in Joris's commentary in *Breathturn Into Timestead*, 461.
32. Celan, *The Meridian,* 6.
33. Ibid., 2.
34. Ibid., 6.
35. Ibid., 6.
36. Ibid., 8.
37. Ibid., 2.
38. Ibid., 5.
39. Ibid., 6.
40. Ibid., 120.
41. Ibid., 47.
42. Ibid., 123.

43. Ibid., 3.
44. Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV,* 392.
45. Ibid., 389.
46. On Löwy's interpretation of Thesis I, the puppet is not capable of "winning the game", which has a double meaning: correctly interpreting history and defeating the main historical enemy of Fascism. Winning the game requires the vivification of the puppet with theology and Löwy reads the subsequent Theses as fleshing out a historical materialism that can win the game. *Fire Alarm*: *Reading Walter Benjamin*, 25. On my reading, the goal is neither to win nor lose, but to end the game. See also: Roberts, "The Absolute Present: Agnes Heller's Philosophy of History in Fragments," 2–3.
47. Heller, *A Philosophy of History in Fragments,* 14.
48. Celan, *The Meridian,* 7.
49. Ibid., 7.
50. January 20 is also the date of the Wannsee Conference and the "final solution". For Celan to write himself from Lenz's January 20 is not expressive of a desire to forget the extermination that unfolded from the conference, but to expand the horizon of the present by including previously unrecognized events into its own narrative.
51. For more on the destructive energies of historical materialism, which I regard as essential to the question concerning how we are to inherit the ideas of Marx, see: Blanchot, "Marx's Three Voices," 98–100; Derrida, *Specters of Marx*.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Shannon Hayes is a Doctoral Candidate at the University of Oregon. Her research interests are in Aesthetics, Critical Theory and Phenomenology. Her dissertation is titled, "Melancholy and the Politics of Disinvestment".

Bibliography

Benjamin, B. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Rolf Tiedemman. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999.
Benjamin, B. *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910–1940*. Edited by Theodor Adorno and Gershom Scholem. Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1994.
Benjamin, B. *Illuminations*. Edited by Hannah Arendt. New York: Schocken Books, 2007.
Benjamin, B. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Translated by John Osbourne. New York: Verso, 2009.
Benjamin, B. *Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940*. Edited by Michael Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2003.
Benjamin, B. *Selected Writings: Volume 1, 1913–1926*. Edited by Michael Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2004.
Blanchot, B. "Marx's Three Voices." In *Friendship*, 98–100, translated by Elisabeth Roudinesco. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.
Buck-Morss, S. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute*. New York: The Free Press, 1997.
Buck-Morss, S. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989.
Byrne, D. "The Victory of the Proletariat is Inevitable: The Millenarian Nature of Marxism." *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2011): 59–67.
Celan, P. *Breathturn Into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry of Paul Celan*. Translated by Pierre Joris. New York: FSG, 2015.

Celan, P. *The Meridian*. Translated by Pierre Joris. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007.
Celan, P. *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*. Translated by John Felstiner. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001.
Derrida, J. *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. New York: Routledge, 1994.
Di Cesare, D. *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz*. New York: SUNY Press, 2012.
Hamacher, W. "Now: Walter Benjamin and Historical Time." In *Walter Benjamin and History*, edited by Andrew Benjamin, 38–68. New York: Continuum, 2005.
Laclau, E., and C. Mouffe. *Hegemony and Socialist Struggle*. New York: Verso Books, 2014.
Levine, M. "Poetry's Demands and Abrahamic Sacrifice: Celan's Poems for Eric." *MLN* 126 (2011): 1014–1048.
Löwy, M. *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*. New York: Verso, 2005.
Lyon, J. *Paul Celan and Martin Heidegger: An Unresolved Conversation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
Pensky, M. "Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images." In *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, edited by David Ferris, 177–198. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
Roberts, D. "The Absolute Present: Agnes Heller's Philosophy of History in Fragments." *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 273 (2015): 279–289.
Salminen, A. "Meridian Zero." *Angelaki* 17 (2012): 75–84.
Salminen, A. "On Breathroutes: Paul Celan's Poetics of Breathing." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 12 (2014):107–126.