

'NORTH OF THE FUTURE': HISTORIOGRAPHY
AND MATERIALIST POETICS

by

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This thesis revolves around two central problems. The first of these problems is the relation of sign and referent, language and world. In response to this problem, I try to posit a 'materialist poetics': an epistemology that rejects the metaphysics of the 'post-modern' world-view and its equally problematic empiricist-positivist counterpart. This materialist poetics, composed from a hybrid of Marxist and post-structuralist theoretical strains, seeks to assert both the materiality of language (sign) and the materiality of the world (referent), as well as the materiality of the distance and interference between them.

The second problem this thesis addresses is the relation of poetics to historiography. I try -- using the ideas of the German Marxist Walter Benjamin -- to posit a third point of view; one in which the linear binary space/time opposition is warped beyond recognition and different ways of conceptualizing space and time emerge.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. 'NORTH OF THE FUTURE'.....	4
Disapora.....	4
Narcissus/Orpheus.....	25
Crossing Time.....	44
III. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	56

INTRODUCTION

This thesis is composed of a series of conversations between me and my thesis advisor, Prof. Pyle. The conversations were recorded and transcribed over the course of winter term, 1997, and the text was then edited and rearranged to give it a semblance of order. References and quotations were added when and where it seemed appropriate. The subject of our conversations, and thus the subject of my thesis, was an imaginary project, a project that--due to its unfocused and all-consuming scope--will remain unwritten: it would be an understatement to say that this is not exactly a great loss. The title of my hypothetical project is 'North of the Future' (a line from a poem by Paul Celan), and so I used that title for my thesis as well.

In his first question, Prof. Pyle asked me to 'sketch out the directions' of my project. As a result of my answer to that question, the first section of my thesis contains an introduction to the problems I was trying to explore, and the tentative solutions that I reached. It would be pointless to repeat that introduction here. Suffice it to say that the conversations contained in the first two sections, and the beginning of the third, revolve (in the few moments when they are not spinning out of orbit due to their sheer absence of

gravity) around the issue of defining a materialist poetics. Of course, as will happen--explicitly or implicitly--in any attempt to formulate a theory of poetics, other unavoidable issues came up, such as: the question of sign and referent; subject and object; self and other; the problem of ideology, and other questions--or, as some might say, 'problematics'--too numerous and breathtaking to mention.

Those first two sections of the thesis are, essentially, the result of a tortuous merger of certain (primarily de Manian and Derridian) strains of post-structuralism and certain (primarily Althusserian and Benjaminian) strains of marxism. The operative word here being 'strain.' This strained hybrid form--'the fragment of an uncreated creature', as Shelley might call it--is the materialist poetics that the sub-title of my thesis (and the subtitle of the hypothetical, virtual project that is the subject of the real conversations of which my actual thesis is composed) refers to. In the last part of the second section, and most of the third and final section, the discussion topic is the relation of that fragmented poetic materialist creature to historiography and the philosophy of history; or, to put it simply, the relation of space to time.

In conclusion, it should be said that in this thesis there are many instances of incoherence. Those instances will, rightly, make apparent my own inability to think clearly and/or clearly articulate what I am thinking. But my hope is that, in at least some of those inarticulate moments,

something other than my own personal difficulties will emerge: namely, the sublime difficulty of the ideas with which I was trying to engage.

'NORTH OF THE FUTURE'

Diaspora

F.P.- I'm going to start by asking you to sketch out the directions of your project.

M.N.- In general, the aim of the project is to articulate the relationship between poetics and historiography, and--more specifically--between historical materialism and materialist poetics. So, first of all, I would posit the question: what is a materialist poetics? How would you go about defining it? In what ways would you differentiate it from traditional modes of poetics? And, at the same time, in what ways would this particular materialist poetics differ from other definitions of materialist poetics (bourgeois and socialist realism, for example)? And there is also the question of traditional--some would say 'idealist' or metaphysical'--poetic figures and motifs and tropes, such as; voice, song, singing, prayer, blessing, witnessing, naming, light, epiphany, revelation, redemption, mourning, etc.. Is there a place for those tropes in a materialist poetics? And, if so, what would they look like? In what ways would they be reformulated and warped?

Secondly (although, really, all of these questions occur simultaneously, and to ask one is to ask all of them at once, so in a way it is necessary but unfortunate that we have to number or order them in this way), after defining a materialist poetics, I would ask this question: how is a materialist poetics related to historical materialism, materialist historiography? Do they coincide with one another epistemologically? Or do they collide? Are they parallel universes--these two materialisms, one poetic, the other historical--or is their relationship contradictory and irreconcilable.

And how you ask and answer--or leave unasked and unanswered--all these questions will always have implications in terms of how you conceptualize space and time, and the position of the human subject within space and time, and the relationship of subject to object and self to other, and the problem of ideology, and other issues which are central in determining the direction that any theory of poetics--and any philosophy of history--will take.

F.P.- I think that's an interesting place to begin. Or, rather, an interesting number of places. And I guess I might start by asking you: what is the discerning factor of a materialist poetics? In other words, what distinguishes a materialist poetics from an idealist one? Is there something about the poetics part that makes it materialist?

M.N.- You mean, something in the poem itself?

F.P.- Yes.

M.N.- I would say yes, then. The differentiation would not ultimately be made in the interpretation of the poem, but in the form of the poem itself. Of course, there are many instances where one critic might read a poem as idealist, while another critic might read the same poem as materialist. For example, Elaine Scarry's Donne is a materialist, but her's is obviously not the dominant interpretation. You can see this kind of interpretive discrepancy also in the case of the contemporary poet Jorie Graham, whose poems--I would say--are maybe the best example in the history of the English language of what I'm calling materialist poetics. And yet the consensus--represented most visibly by the critic Helen Vendler--is that Graham is a metaphysical poet (Vendler, 1995). And all this after Graham's last volume was titled simply 'Materialism' (Graham, 1995). She must be wondering what exactly she has to do.

But, those problems aside, I'm saying yes: there is such a thing as a materialist poetics; that it exists--whether we are aware of it or not--outside of any particular interpretation, and that it can be objectively identified (or 'discerned', as you put it) within the form of specific texts. I'm saying, to quote from Graham's poem 'The Field' (Graham, 1996) that there is a made note 'distinct

from/the intended/note, distinct also from the heard/note/distinct from the imagined note'(p.131): a materialist note that asserts itself and causes a kind of tortion.

F.P.- And what would that be? Do you have an example?

M.N.- I think I'd like to begin on a more general, less site-specific level. I think I'd like to begin on a different level of abstraction, and let the specific examples come up as we go. So I'd like to start by talking about poetics in general.

F.P.- Poetics? As in 'materialist poetics'?

M.N.- Yes. Or, at least, what may be there in all poetics--in all language, even--but what materialist poetics makes us aware of; processes that may always be taking place but that a materialist poetics will make more apparent. But I'm getting ahead of myself here, or maybe I'm hopelessly behind, maybe I've passed myself by completely...it's all so difficult to explicate.

F.P.- In past discussions, you've described a number of 'moments' or 'worlds' that make up a poem. Maybe, if you mapped out those 'worlds', that might be a good place to start.

M.N.- All right. I would start, then, by saying that there are five 'worlds' in a poem. And yet before I even begin to 'map' (as you put it) those 'worlds', I would have to make a qualifying--although probably not clarifying--statement. Because to say that there are five 'worlds' in a poem is a necessary way of reducing and simplifying, but in no way do I mean to imply that those worlds exist separately from another or that they follow one after the other in a linear progression. Rather, these worlds are moments that take place perpetually at the same time. This problem that I'm trying--and probably failing--to describe has an analogy in The German Ideology (Marx, 1978) where Marx outlines the 'four aspects of social activity' and then states that these four aspects should not be read as progressive stages of development, but rather as four 'moments' that--as he writes--'have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and still assert themselves in history today'(p.156-157).

So--getting back to my description of the five 'worlds' of a poem--I think the image I would use is not a map, but a flow-chart. A poem is a flow-chart. In one of Jorie Graham's poems (Graham, 1991) she posits 'a story-line composed entirely of changing tracks'(p.102-103). And I think that's what I'm asking you to imagine: five simultaneous channels or currents, five cathodes, five nervous systems. And you could think of these nervous systems as five diasporas, five worlds that are inherently diasporic, five hematomas that bleed into one another. And so, in fact, there are really many more than

five; exponentially more. Because at each plane, at each tangent and margin, each circuit and eclipse...at each conjunction and disjunction, there are other worlds happening.

F.P.- At each articulation and disarticulation, yes.

M.N.- So that in the spaces between them, and the spaces within them, there are other worlds. And here I would have to make another qualification, and say that this is not--that a poem is not--a 'world without borders,' which is an insidious phrase that's used alot today, not just in popular culture but in certain versions of so-called 'post-modern' theory and 'culture studies.' And I would absolutely define what I'm describing in opposition to that phrase, by saying no: the poem is made up entirely of borders, or limits. Every one of these worlds--or diasporas--is a limit, a terminal. So that in fact a poem is not an infinite world, but rather a world of *infinite limitation*, which is a concept that Nietzsche (Nietzsche, 1974) conjures with this impossible phrase: 'in the horizon of the infinite' (p.124). So that each moment--one is made aware--is peripheral, marginal, and tangential. So that each world is liminal, terminal.

And, having said that, I also want to be careful to disassociate this notion of limits from another contemporary--or 'post-contemporary', as they say--fixation; a fixation that finds its political expression in an emphasis on

locality and localized struggles. I don't particularly want to discuss this fixation on the local, except to say that what I'm articulating is not meant in any way to be its poetic corollary. Rather, the poetics that I am trying to outline places its emphasis on displacement and dislocation.

Althusser(Althuser, 1970) when he explains what he means by the term 'over-determination,' writes of 'a circle with a center other than itself, a decentered circle'(p.102). And I think what I'm trying to articulate is something similar: a poetics that breaks the horizons of bourgeois hermeneutics, and breaks at the same time with the equally idealist and metaphysical notion of a world without horizons. Anyway, I'm sure this issue will continue to emerge--in one form or another--at every point in our conversation, so for now it suffices to say: a poem is a decentered circle, a poem is over-determined.

F.P.- So, that being said, what are these five 'moments' or 'worlds'?

M.N.- I'd say that the first world--the first moment or diaspora--is 'the world' in the sense that you would normally mean when you use that word. And by that I mean nature, and objects--natural objects and human-made artifacts--, modifications that humans have made within the 'natural' world, etc..

F.P.- Modes of production?

M.N.- Yes. But, for our purposes, it could be anything; anything thought is trying to comprehend. I know it still isn't quite yet easy today to assert the existence of such a world. In many places a person who does so will be laughed at, or worse. You may as well run away and join the circus. But that world is always asserting its existence, whether or not we are aware.

Even if you accept Saussure's position and say that the relationship between signifier and signified--between verbal or written sign and mental image--is arbitrary (Saussure, 1959), and even if you accept the 'post-modern' notion that the relationship between sign and referent--word and thing--is arbitrary and that language is only differences between signs, you are still left with the haunting question of the referent. Why should the uncertain, unstable nature of *reference* lead to the total disappearance of the *referent*? In other words, you can agree completely (although I'm not saying I do) with the 'post-modern' assumptions about language, and yet you are still left with the fact that language is trying to describe something. Of course, someone might say that the 'something' is language: that what language is describing is, in fact, itself. And I wouldn't necessarily disagree. But I would add that language is trying to describe itself in motion: that language is a process trying to watch itself as it watches another process,

another kind of materiality. And that other kind of materiality is--I would argue--the materiality of the referent.

And here I would also make the distinction--a distinction that most sane people make--between 'post-modernism' (particularly American 'post-modernism') and post-structuralism. After all, it was Paul de Man who said that 'it would be unfortunate to confuse the materiality of the signifier with the materiality of what it signifies' and defined 'ideology' as the 'confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenality' (de Man, 1986, p.11). Of course, I realize that de Man saw that kind of 'confusion' or 'ideology' as a process embedded in language, and in the relation of language to world, sign to referent. And his followers always emphasize that aspect of his thought: the idea that the field of meaning is always confusing and ideological. Yet they forget that--for de Man--language is only confusing because it is always already being confused and crossed-up by the resistance and interference of another kind of materiality; a materiality that de Man refers to as 'natural reality.'

In other words, 'post-modernism' is vulgar and reductive. It opposes one form of materiality to another in a binary way. And once things are framed that way, it tends to force everyone to take sides: either you accept the thesis that there is no referent, that there are only signs; or you take the antithetical position, which ends up being a kind of

return to positivism and empiricism. The problem is that the field has been virtually abandoned to those two positions; they are almost the only points of view that remain. And those points of view are really just dragged-up versions of the two traditional forms of classical liberalism (metaphysics and empiricism) which--as always--seem to be diametrically opposed to one another but are actually based in the same set of assumptions. So what you see, in American academic circles, is a kind of pseudo-debate between--to paraphrase Lenin--an unintelligent form of idealism and an equally unintelligent form of materialism: they are at opposite poles, but they revolve on the same axis.

When Marx wrote the 1844 Manuscripts, the spectacle of that false liberal debate still appeared as tragedy. But by the time he wrote The German Ideology it was clear, just from the tone of the language he used, that he regarded it as farce. The fact that such a debate still dominates much of academic discourse today...if it was farce one hundred and fifty years ago...I don't know what to call it...maybe it's become tragic again. Because that kind of binary opposition between sign and referent results in the most uninteresting ways of looking at--and thinking of--language and the world.

Fredric Jameson has written that 'language is a kind of beance or opening onto the Other,' that 'language is never a plenitude in itself,' that it is 'always in its very structure a formed incompleteness' (Jameson, 1972, p.172). I like Jameson's formulation. But I would also ask: why is

language incomplete? Why is it never a 'plenitude'? And the answer, I think, is that language is description; a description that always meets with a kind of resistance: the resistance of things to thought. (And that zone of resistance and interference, is--I think--a third kind of materiality). In the end, 'post-modernism' presents a dumbed down, one-dimensional image of language. And this image is the result of an ideology that focuses on language--as if language were a closed system--to the exclusion of everything that is 'Other,' to the exclusion of everything else.

F.P.- So we're still...this is still taking place within the register of the first 'world' or 'moment'? (I just want to be sure where we are here). And what you're calling the 'first'--I realize that you've said they are all taking place simultaneously--is the referent?

M.N.- Yes. And the second world--or moment, or diaspora--is thought: thought perpetually going out, like a signal. A thought going out to be true to the world, going out to touch the world, and being untrue, and always missing. I mean thought is 'missing' in both senses of the word: as in bad aim, failure, inaccuracy, aberration, as something deviant and erratic, something missing its mark: but also as in homesickness, loss, mourning and melancholia, the sense of missing something.

Freud said love is homesickness. And Heidegger--I think--says basically the same thing about thought when he writes that 'the thing itself that must be thought about turns away from man, has turned away long ago' (Heidegger, cited in Graham, 1991, p.xii). So you might say, following Heidegger and paraphrasing Freud: thought is homesickness. Of course, what Heidegger is articulating doesn't have much to do with materialism of any kind, but I think it is a case--to reference that famous quote from Lenin again--of an intelligent idealism coming closer to an intelligent materialism than empiricist or positivist materialism ever will.

And I think Benjamin often hints at a similar notion of homesickness, or missing. For instance, in a letter to Scholem he states that 'the angel resembles all that I have parted from' (Benjamin, cited in Graham, 1995, p.55). Or, in the Theological-Political Fragment, he writes that 'nature is messianic by reason of its eternal and total passing away' and defines 'the task of world politics' as 'to strive after such passing' (Benjamin, 1978, p.313). And that's how I would define the task of a materialist poetics: to strive after--and make us aware of--this passing or missing; not to correct or fix it. And this--obviously--is similar to what Benjamin describes in The Task of the Translator (Benjamin, 1969, p. 69-83); a breaking of the vessels that does not reveal and set an original fracture, but instead reveals, and leaves

unfixed, a broken process--or a process of breaking--that is continually taking place.

So, there is always something missing. There is always something truant, something absent. And I would of course want to differentiate this concept of loss and homesickness from any metaphysical idea of origin or fall, of an originary loss. What I'm trying to describe, rather, is a diaspora without origins; diaspora as a permanent, perpetual, intractable condition. What I am trying to imagine is a place where loss accumulates, and a place composed entirely of that accumulation of loss. And this place--this luminous trauma between referent and thought--would be the third moment of the poem. It is a blue, nebulous space; a wounded, ulcerated, blood-shot space, where the world hemorrhages into the retina and the eye hemorrhages out into the world...

F.P.- And the fourth moment or world?

M.N.- The fourth diaspora is language. And I know it seems strange, in talking about poetics, that I would come so late to this 'world', that I would talk about those other three--the referent, the thought of the referent, and the space between the thought and the referent--first. So of course I would reiterate emphatically that all of these moments--all of these convolutions--are occurring at once, and that they can only be 'expressed' (for lack of a better term) or signaled in and through language. And this fact has already

become apparent in our discussion when, in trying to define the first 'world', it has already been necessary to discuss the issue of language and reference.

But, before I go on, I would also like to add this: in The German Ideology, Marx (Marx, 1978) states unequivocally that 'language is as old as consciousness' (p.158). That sentence, for obvious reasons, is sometimes interpreted as a kind of 'post-modern' moment in Marx, as an admission on his part that there is nothing outside of language. Yet, I think you have to take into account what the word 'consciousness' means for Marx, and for Marx--as I read him, anyway-- 'consciousness' refers to a kind of estranged awareness, an awareness of the world produced by what Brecht would call an alienation effect.

And here I would return to that passage from Heidegger (cited in Graham, 1991) where he describes a process--a process taking place within thought--that exists 'whether or not we become aware of it' (p.xii). And that's the key phrase: 'whether or not we become aware.' Because I think that language is precisely that: an estranged awareness of the world and of thought; an awareness that something is passing away, that something has gone--and is going--missing, truant, absent. Language names--or tries to name--what is unnamable: the referent, the thought of the referent, and the space and time between the referent and thought. Language does not make that space disappear; rather, it marks and highlights the appearance and emergence of that space, or our

awareness of that appearance. It does not amend or negotiate or compensate for that space, and it does not heal or even mediate between or within it. Nor is it the cause or source of that wounded space. Rather, language is simply--or, actually, quite complicatedly--trying to name and wreath that space.

Maybe what I'm saying would be less convoluted if I gave you an example from 'real' life. Recently, last summer, I noticed a small child in a meadow. He was probably around two years old. Someone had left a bicycle there, in this field, and the child was examining the bicycle, and at the same time he was pronouncing the word for it over and over to himself. He must have gone on like that for forty-five minutes to an hour. he would spin the wheels and stare as they revolved. then he would experiment, taking various objects (a frisbee, for example) and placing them on the spokes while the wheels were still spinning. And the whole time, he enunciated the word, almost prayerfully; 'bicycle, bicycle, bicycle.'

And--for me, anyway--that is an example of the process that is highlighted in a materialist poetics. Because there seemed to be, in the child's actions--in his mode of approaching the world--a kind of non-cathetic fixation or vigilance; a recognition of two kinds of materiality (the materiality of the referent and the materiality of the sign) and an awareness of the estranged, asymmetrical, tangential relationship between the two; and of the wonderful, almost

miraculous quality of that alienation, of that severance and estrangement.

F.P.- So, in this example, the first 'world' or 'diaspora' of a poem, of what makes a materialist poem--or makes a poem materialist--is the world, the referent. But using this same example--of the child saying 'bike, bike, bike'--one could say that's a naming, an act of poetic naming.

M.N.- Yes. But it differs from the way that metaphysical poetics has conceptualized the act of naming. Because, in that metaphysical tradition--and also in the critiques or 'deconstructions' of that tradition--naming has often implied a certain relationship between subject and object, and self and other; a relationship of domination or ownership, a property relation. To look at something and give it a name has meant to master it, to make it yours. And this is also--obviously--connected to vision and visibility, to the gaze. But what I'm talking about is different. What I'm talking about is an act of naming--and looking--that represents a kind of hyper-vigilance, a hyper-awareness of alterity and limitation, distance and space. And the name--in this version--is an avowal of that space.

And that would bring us to the fifth 'world' or 'moment' of a poem, which is the poem itself. The poem is an attempt to name, and through that naming--or distancing--to make us aware of processes that are already taking place whether we

are aware of them or not. The poem names or renames the process of naming...

F.P.- But--to get back to your example of the child and the bicycle--what are you describing? Is it a kind of nominalism in which the child utters the bicycle into existence? Or is it a response; the child responding to the bicycle, to the world?

M.N.- I'm not sure I can answer 'yes' to either of those questions. If I say yes, the child is uttering the bicycle into existence, that would be--I think--an entirely idealist, metaphysical position. In that answer, there might be space for the materiality of language, but it would completely negate the materiality of the world, or bicycle. Conversely, if I say that the child is simply responding to the bicycle, that would seem--to me--to result in a kind of flat, euclidian empiricist-positivist materialism, as well as a mechanistic behaviorist pedagogy. And in either answer--I think--an image of the relationship between subject and object emerges that is static and one-dimensional; an image that I find unsatisfactory.

So I would begin to answer your question by referring to the double-meaning of the word you used: 'utterance.' You asked if the child 'utters' the bicycle into existence. And I would base my answer in the fact that the word 'utterance' also means 'limit.' The two meanings of that one word define-

-for me, at least--a materialist poetics. Celan described his poetic project by saying: 'it names, it posits, it measures the area of the given and the possible' (Celan, 1986, p.16). And that is what the child was doing when he named the bicycle. The child's utterance marks a vast limit between referent and thought. And subjectivity, or what we usually call subjectivity, becomes an effect of this liminal spatial relation. But this is problematic and difficult to explain...maybe I can answer your question--or, at least, create a diversion--in an oblique way, by discussing a problem from Althusser's essay on contradiction and over-determination.

The problem I'm referring to--which I think is related in some way to your question about the child and the bicycle--is the problem of the last instance. Althusser--as you know--takes this concept from Engels, from a passage where Engels states that the superstructure is determined 'in the last instance' (Althusser, 1969, p. 112) by the mode of production, or base. We could translate this into the terms of our discussion and say that the bicycle--the referent--determines 'in the last instance' the child's signing. And we could say, using Althusser's terms, that what I was describing was the imaginary relation of the child to the real bicycle. We could also say--again using Althusserian terms, or terms that he appropriates--that the relationship between child and bicycle is overdetermined; in other words, that the relationship is not only determined by the material fact of the referent

(bicycle) but by other factors as well. And we could say, finally, that subjectivity--the human subject--is not static and unchanging but is, rather, the protean and variable effect of this set of spatial relations.

At the beginning of our conversation, I used that terminology in formulating what I've--simplistically--called the five 'worlds' or 'moments' of a poem: I said then that a poem is 'overdetermined.' The problem I have, however, is with Althusser's use of the term 'last instance.' It is a problem that arises in that same essay on contradiction and overdetermination, when he goes on to write that 'from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the last instance never comes' (Althusser, 1969, p.113). And this is just wrong. Or, it's wrong if Althusser is claiming to base his position in Engels' text. Because, when Engels speaks of a 'last instance' he is referring to an instance that is a primarily determinant part--though certainly not all--of every instant. Engels' use of the term 'last instance' is no different from Marx's description of the 'four aspects of social activity.' I used this concept also, at the beginning of our talk. Marx writes that these are 'four aspects or moments' which have 'existed simultaneously' since the first moment and 'continue to assert themselves' to the last.

So it's strange, really, if you reflect on the fact that Althusser is always thought of as a 'structuralist', or as a philosopher undertaking a synchronic reading of Marx. Because, in the example I just gave--the example of

Althusser's use of the term 'last instance'--Marx and Engels come out looking much more 'structuralist' than Althusser. Marx and Engels insist on a perpetual assertion of the last instance; a last instance that is always already embedded in every other instant. And it is Althusser--I think--who is thinking in much more diachronic terms when he says that 'the lonely hour of the last instance never comes.'

So, what does any of this have to do with my allegory of the child and the bicycle, and the questions you asked about that allegory? I think my answer would be this: the bicycle is there, irrevocably. And the child is there. And the cataract, the nebula of space between the two is there. And thought is going out into that distance, and thought is missing. And the child is saying 'bicycle,' almost prayerfully. It is as if the existence of the bicycle--and the space between the child and the bicycle--were so strange and shocking that the word exists as a kind of persuasion (to persuade the child that what he sees is real) and also a kind of dissuasion (to dissuade what he sees from going).

And the space is disconsolate. It exists 'whether we become aware of it or not.' But the child is apprehensive; he is aware, he is conscious of it. And he is aware of the fact that its existence does not depend on his awareness; that the space does not particularly need his blessing. There is nothing human in that space. There is no empathy or identity there. But he needs that space. He is aware that in a very real way, for that moment, 'who he is in his essential

nature' (to use Heidegger's phrase) is contingent upon that fluctuating distance. 'Who he is' is the result of an alienation effect; an effect of pull and torque. Althusser describes a similar process, when he says that the effect of distance in a Brecht play is to take the viewer and 'make him into this distance itself' (Althusser, 1969, p.148). That is what is happening when the child looks at the bicycle. And--through the poetic act of naming--the child is attempting to avow that distance; to bless and witness that alien, inhuman space.

You see, in this example, the 'lonely hour of the last instance' always comes. It is there from the first to the last. Or, even if you agree with Althusser, and say that it never really comes--in the sense that it is never completely or totally determining--you would still have to say that the last instance is always there precisely in its non-arrival; that the non-arrival or deferral of the last instance is a star-crossed event, an emergency that is always happening. (Here, of course, you would be using Derridian--and Benjaminian--messianic terminology again).

Even if you completely negate the referent, its traces will always be visible, like a shadow left at ground zero. If this were not the case language--and poetic language--would be perfectly articulate. There would be none of the convolutions and hauntings that you see formally in a poem by Emily Dickenson, or Georg Trakl, or Paul Celan, or Jorie Graham, etc.. Without the last instance, language is a

euclidean grid: there is no sense of tension or strain or anxiety, no dissonance or urgency, no apprehensiveness. Without the last instance, a poem lacks the utter distortion (or distortion of utterance) necessary to make it interesting or--at least--to make it materialist.

So--to return to the child/bicycle example--there is the referent, and the sign, And there is the irradiated, phosphorescent space: the space of resistance and interference that in effect represents a third, much more confused and indeterminate form of materiality. There is the attempt to think 'bicycle,' and there is the missing and mourning, the 'resistance to representation,' the impossibility of description. And poetics--materialist poetics, at least--is born describing that impossibility; in that difficult, lonely, inhuman place.

Narcissus/Orpheus

F.P.- How does a poem work that produces this 'materialist' poetics? You say 'materialist' poetics. But aren't you really just describing the condition of all poetics? What is the difference between a metaphysical and a materialist poem?

M.N.- I'd like to answer that question through a reading of the two different versions of the Narcissus myth. Because I think that there--in the distance between the two versions of the story--you can see an example of the difference you asked

about; the difference between metaphysical and materialist poetics. And I would also like to focus on the Narcissus myth because it is so marginal within the history of Western poetics, where Orpheus (or, one version of Orpheus) is the central figure, and where the narcissistic element has been sublimated and stigmatized.

In fact, it could be argued that the disavowal of the narcissistic in favor of the orphic is essential to a metaphysical or idealist poetics, whereas a materialist poetics will tend to highlight the moment of narcissism. But this process of disavowal and sublimation is not only taking place between the narcissistic and the orphic elements: it also takes place within the narcissistic moment itself. So, as a result, there are two ways of telling the story of Narcissus.

In one version, Narcissus sees himself as other. There is a shock of (mis)recognition, and he becomes aware that there is a space and distance between and within himself. And--in this version--after he stares long enough at his own mirror-image, a metamorphosis occurs and he mutates into a flower. This is the hegemonic way of telling the story. It is the version that Freud uses in his essay 'On Narcissism', and it is the version you will most likely find if you look up the word 'narcissism' in the dictionary. And it is also, I would argue, the metaphysical-idealist way of narrating the myth.

The other, often forgotten version--the version the Greeks actually told--is the one that I would call 'materialist.' In this version, the story is the same except for one element: the metamorphosis occurs in a different way. The body is not dematerialized and turned into a flower. Rather, after trying to grasp his own image as it appears to him on the surface of the water, Narcissus stabs himself to death. This convoluted inward stabbing motion--in my view, anyway--is not unlike the grasping motion; it is, actually, the extreme and final moment of that attempt to grasp. And then--from the carbon and phosphorous, from the glucose of his blood--a flower coagulates and blooms.

So, in the idealist-metaphysical, auratic version of the story--the sanitized, homogenized version--there is an elision: the body dematerializes, and the space between the body and the image dematerializes as well...

F.P.-...I don't mean to interrupt. But, in labeling that version of Narcissus as ideological or auratic, are you saying that it is a kind of failure?

M.N.- Yes and no. I don't mean to present the two versions in static opposition to one another. Their relationship is--I think--much more complicated. The materialist version does not simply replace the idealist-metaphysical version. Rather, the materialist version displaces the idealist version by explaining how it works. The ultimate result of both versions

is the flower. Yet, in the metaphysical version all we see is pure metamorphosis, pure synthesis: the body (and the space between the body and the image) disappears. In the materialist version, the flower blossoms from the platelets of blood: we are still left with the wounded, nervous, body. So--in that materialist version--there is a stigma: the wounds in the body, and wounded spaces between the flower and body, remain open and unhealed.

It might be useful, in trying to explain all this, to refer to the concepts of symbol and allegory. As I framed it, the idealist version of the Narcissus story is closed and symbolic: the clotted flower is a symbol. The materialist way of narrating the story is, by contrast, open and allegorical: it does not prevent the blood-cells from coagulating, but it shows us the process through which platelets of blood clot into the petals of a flower, rather than pretending that this process never took place (de Man, 1979; Jacobs, 1989).

And there is also an obvious parallel here between the relation of symbol to allegory and the relation of the beautiful to the sublime. The metaphysical version of the Narcissus story would be beautiful, and the materialist version would of course represent the sublime. But I want to distance my use of those terms--beautiful and sublime--to a certain extent from the way that they have been traditionally used, and also from the way that they are sometimes still employed today. Often, I think, the two terms are opposed to one another in a binary way. And what I'm saying may

reproduce that opposition to a certain extent, but I'm also trying to suggest something a bit different (not that I'm the first person to make this suggestion).

What I'm saying--using the Narcissus myth as an example--is that within aesthetics the production of the beautiful, the ideological, is inevitable. And the sublime does not make the beautiful or ideological magically go away. No. There may be--to use Jorie Graham's phrase--'an end of beauty' (Graham, 1985). There may be a moment--as Benjamin describes in his Baudelaire essay--when the beautiful is no longer possible (Benjamin, 1969, p.155-201). But that end or impossibility of beauty is one that lasts forever. And what the sublime does is distance us, estrange us. The sublime makes us aware: it takes us to the site of production and allows us to watch the process as it is taking place (Zizek, 1989).

So, to return to your original question. I would say yes: what I have been describing as 'materialist poetics' is really the wounded condition of all poetics. But that does not mean that all poetics is materialist. There is a differentiation to be made. And that difference exists because a metaphysical-idealist poetics always covers up this wounded condition.

F.P.- Is it that there is an attempt to cover up the fact that a wound ever happened? Or is it that there is a recognition of this wound, and an attempt to heal it?

M.N.- That probably depends on the specific text. In Whitman's poems, for example, I think there is the recognition of a wound, and his--idealist--poetic project becomes a project of healing. And that moment of recognition is probably what complicates Whitman's poems and makes them interesting. There are both materialist and metaphysical instances in Whitman, and perhaps his particular, peculiar poems result from a--forced--attempt to reconcile the two.

Generally speaking, though, I think you can make some very clear distinctions between metaphysical-idealist and materialist poetics. A metaphysical poetics is based in the assumption that there was--or will be--an auratic and unitary world; a world in which the human subject was whole and undivided, and a world in which sign and referent were also indivisible. A metaphysical-idealist poetics sees language as the source and opening of a wound and--simultaneously--as the means to close it. (So, perhaps the moment of recognition of the wound and the desire to heal it are part of the same process). A metaphysical-idealist poetics wants--to use a phrase from the Jewish mystical tradition--to heal the world, to fix the broken vessels. By contrast, a materialist poetics sees language as the naming or acknowledgment--the consciousness and awareness--of a wound that was and is always there. And a materialist poetics wants always to mark and re-open that wound or stigma, to prevent false closures and reconciliations.

Whitman--I think--presents an interesting, complicated example of metaphysical poetics. And an interesting contrast to Whitman's metaphysics is the contemporary American poet Jorie Graham, whose work--which I would call 'materialist'--often involves an implicit engagement with problems from Whitman's poems. Her poems--or, at least, the poems contained in her three latest volumes--highlight and develop the negative spaces in Whitman. Whitman is always looking for resemblances; signs of convergence, corresponance, reconciliation...

F.P.- ...crossings.

M.N.- Yes...cathectic sites; the places where things clot and congeal. Whereas in Graham's work, I think, the poem is always a site of resistance and interference; the place where we get our signals crossed. The Graham poem (I'm not sure about the poet) is searching out confusions, miscommunications...the place where all the swift confluences diverge... Whitman's poems search out likeness, whereas Graham's poems are situated in a 'region of unlikeness'(Graham, 1991, p.37). Which is not to say that Graham's poems can simply be opposed to Whitman's. Rather, in Graham the opposition between similar and dissimilar--between sameness and difference--is blurred. Or, to put it another way, the opposition between strange and not-strange is itself made to seem strange and dissimilar. So, in her poems, it is

always difficult to tell the difference between connection and disconnection, appearance and disappearance: every recognition, every apprehension is--at the same time--an instance of misrecognition and misapprehension.

And both of these poets--Whitman and Graham--are fixated on the self, on the position of the human subject in the world. But in Graham's poems, a different image of the subject emerges. For instance, the first poem in *The End Of Beauty* (Graham, 1987) is titled 'Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them (Adam and Eve)' and the first lines of that poem are, 'the gesture like a fruit torn from a limb/torn swiftly'(p.3). So subjectivity is figured as the effect--not the cause--of a circumstantial gesture, and this gesture is a kind of tearing apart. The subject is different from itself. The subject diverges from itself. And there are numerous poems in that volume in which the problem of subjectivity is approached in this way: 'Self-Portrait as Both Parties'; 'Self-Portrait as Apollo and Daphne'; 'Self-Portrait as Demeter and Persephone'; and--especially--'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay (Penelope at Her Loom)', in which the self emerges as the effect of a continual process of ravelling and unravelling, pulling apart.

So, in answer to the question you posed a minute ago--when you asked if the metaphysical version of the Narcissus story was just an ideological 'failure--I would say no: a materialist poetics does not simply reject and then get past metaphysical-idealist poetics. Rather, materialist poetics

results from a perpetual engagement with the problem of ideology. Baudelaire's allegorical materialism, for example, is born from the impossibility of the lyric, and from a permanent struggle with that impossibility. His poems may result from--to quote Benjamin--'the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock' (Benjamin, 1969, p.194) but what they reveal is that this epiphanal moment of shock and disintegration was always taking place.

Benjamin said of photography that it 'is to unconscious optics what psychoanalysis is to the unconscious.' 'In place of space interwoven with the consciousness of human beings,' Benjamin wrote, the camera reveals a space 'unconsciously interwoven' (Benjamin, 1969, 236-237). And it could be said that materialist poetics is to metaphysical poetics what the camera is to the naked eye. In metaphysical-idealist poetics there is--as you suggested--an instance of recognition when the wound is glimpsed, like a tear in the membrane of a wing. And then the shutter closes, and there is the ideological moment, the moment when the aura is reintegrated.

This process, like 'unconscious optics,' is always taking place. Only, the space of the interval between those two instances--the open instance of recognition and the ideological instance of closure--is not visible to the naked eye. It opens and clicks shut with such swiftness that we don't perceive it. And--to extend this analogy--materialist poetics is like photography or film. The materialist poem slows down and delays this process. The materialist poem, in

its form, is a kind of prolongation or postponement: it prolongs the instance of shock and apprehension; it postpones the instance of closure. And, in the process, it reveals the synapse, the episteme; the stigma of the aperture between those two instances.

So the poem that I alluded to a minute ago, Graham's 'Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay (Penelope at Her Loom)', could be read as an allegory for her entire poetic project, and for materialist poetics in general. Because the poem, in its form, arrests the flow of the hurry and focuses entirely on the lull, on the delay. And this is also, at the same time, an allegory for her relation to Whitman, and--less specifically--an allegory for the relation of materialist to metaphysical poetics. Materialist poetics removes the bandages. It unravels the filaments of metaphysics; 'to see,' as Graham puts it explicitly in the poem, 'what was healed under there when the story lifts/the bandage the history gone into thin air' (Graham, 1987, p.48). It reveals the apparatus, the 'loom' of ideology at work.

And it would be easy to mistake the figure of the poet with the figure of Penelope: the figure working on the loom; Graham at work unthreading, undoing Whitman. Yet what is revealed--perpetually--is not only the poet at work on the apparatus, but also the apparatus at work on the poet; the loom at work on the human subject. This fact is reflected in the title of the poem: not 'self portrait as Penelope' but 'self-portrait as hurry and delay'; self-portrait as a

looming process. The process works both ways, 'the threads running backwards yet forwards' (p.49) as Graham writes. So, just as the metaphysical concept of the poem comes undone, so does the metaphysical concept of the poet. Every nerve is exposed. And what emerges from this constant revelation is an image of the human subject as the effect of this perpetual raveling and unraveling; this nervous, looming motion (de Man, 1979, 1983, 1986; Derrida, 1993; Jacobs, 1978).

F.P.- At the beginning of our discussion, you said that one of the questions facing or--in light of what you've just described--'looming' in the face of a materialist poetics would be the status of certain tropes, like revelation, epiphany, vision, insight...

M.N.- ...Yes, and I think that it's become clear--in the course of our talk--that a materialist poetics does not represent a total rejection of those concepts. Those concepts are not inherently metaphysical or idealist, but I think that as we engaged with them--in the context of defining a materialist poetics--they mutated beyond recognition...

F.P.-...But, the question I was going to ask you was: what about the tropes of song and singing? You mentioned them also at the beginning. And a minute ago--before you began your description of the two Narcissi, and the differences between metaphysical and materialist poetics--you mentioned that it

is Orpheus (and not Narcissus) who is the central figure in the Western lyric tradition. So, my question is: is there a place for Orpheus in your materialist poetics? Is there a place for the orphic tropes of song and singing, of voice?

M.N.- Yes. And, in fact, I think we already implicitly answered your question with the example of the child and the bicycle, which is really a kind of synaesthetic moment when the narcissistic and the orphic blur into one another; a moment of looking and singing. But, to answer your question more directly, maybe the best example would be Rilke and the difficult, complicated relation of Rilke's poems to the poems of Paul Celan. And the place to begin answering your question--obviously--is Rilke's 'Sonnets to Orpheus', because that cycle of poems represents the ultimate example of a metaphysical poetics and--specifically--a metaphysics of song and singing.

There is no interference in the Sonnets to Orpheus. Song is reduced to a kind mono-phonetic euphony. Language in Rilke, as Paul de Man has written, is made to 'sing like a violin' (de Man, 1979, p.38). There is no space between signifier and signified, sign and referent. Or, if there is, the song is meant to close it. As the first lines of the first sonnet read: 'A tree ascended there. Oh pure transcendence!/Oh Orpheus sings! Of tall tree in the ear!' (Rilke, 1989, p.227). de Man describes the ideological effects of this euphonic musicality: 'Possibilities of

representation and expression are eliminated in an askesis which tolerates no other referent than the formal attributes of the vehicle. Since sound is the only property of language that is truly immanent to it and bears no relation to anything that would be situated outside language itself, it will remain as the only available resource' (de Man, 1979, p.32).

The 'Sonnets to Orpheus' are probably--in form and content--Rilke's most unctuous moment. And yet Rilke is so difficult because he does--at other moments--articulate what could be called a materialist notion of song or voice. There is, for example, an uncollected poem titled 'To Music' (Rilke, 1989, p.147). In that poem, there is a sense in which voice gives utterance to the convoluted, warped geometry between subject and object, self and other, inside and outside, language and world: and this convolution is apparent in both the content and form of the poem.

In the 'Sonnets', the singer is a figure who inseminates the world with song. But, in 'To Music', singing is a kind of dissemination or diaspora: it is almost as if Narcissus were singing. Music is referred to as 'a stranger'--as something inhuman and other--but simultaneously as a 'heart-space/grown out of us' and 'the deepest space in us/which, rising above us, forces its way out.' Song is described as a 'departure', a departure of the human subject from itself: 'when the innermost point in us stands/outside, as the most practiced distance, as the other/side of the air' (Rilke, 1989, p.147).

Song, in this poem, does not fill empty space with the vocable. Rather, the song itself is shot through with empty, unvocable spaces, spaces that--as the last line of the poem says--are 'no longer habitable' (p.147).

Paul de Man, as Fredric Jameson describes, found that Rilke most closely approximated a 'deconstructive aesthetic' in his uncollected poems. In de Man's reading, as Jameson writes, 'the great philosophical poems, the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, have been displaced, reduced to a more marginal position in the Rilke canon, where they have been dethroned by the sparser and more fragmentary, well-nigh minimalist fragments, that seem to fore-shadow Celan in their very refusal of plenitude' (Jameson, 1991, p.253). And Rilke may fore-shadow Celan in some places, but Celan--conversely--shadows Rilke. Particularly in his later poems, such as those collected in 'Breathturn' (Celan, 1995), Celan focused his attention on sparse, uninhabitable places. His poetics emphasized sheer noise and interference. He described his poetry as 'a language which wants to locate even its musicality in such a way that it has nothing in common with the euphony which more or less blithely continued to sound alongside the greatest horrors' (Celan, 1986, p. 15).

F.P.- This might be a good place to pose a question about history, about the relation of poetics to historiography. Celan's work is most often described as a post-Holocaust poetics. And, from the quote you just read, it sounds as if

he too saw his work in that light. So, the question I would ask is: how is what you're calling a 'materialist poetics' related to history and historical events? Particularly, what is the relation between Celan's 'materialism' and the Holocaust? Is the Holocaust an event that is responded to in Celan? Is his materialism simply a response?

M.N.- To answer that question, I think it's useful to first make a delineation between the historical event and the poetic representation or non-representation of that event. The historian Arno Mayer (Mayer, 1988) makes a similar distinction when he talks of the difference between the terms 'Judeo-cide' and 'Holocaust'. Judeo-cide is the term Mayer uses to refer to the historical event. And, as an historian, his preference is for the term Judeo-cide because it denotes a specific event, which can be understood and analysed historically. Whereas the term 'Holocaust' is a theological-poetic term...

F.P.-...meaning 'all-burning'...

M.N.- ...or 'all-consuming,' yes. And Mayer's rejection of the term Holocaust is part of his attempt to demystify the event, which has become reified and auratic in the context of Western European and American liberalism. When we use the term Holocaust we confuse the historical event with the theological-poetic event, and we no longer have to ask

difficult questions; questions that might disturb liberal ideology.

So, in answering your question, I would use Mayer's delineation between Holocaust and Judeo-cide: Judeo-cide signifying the event and the attempt to understand it historically; and Holocaust signifying the poetic event, or the event that takes place in poetics when it comes face to face with the historical. So, in a certain sense, I would say yes: Celan's poetry is a response, or an after-effect of the historical event. His poems, undeniably, are a result--a symptom--of the event. But, at the same time--and this is what distinguishes his work from that of any other 'post-Holocaust' poet--they are not. Because what is revealed and made luminous in Celan's poems is a trauma that was always there.

I should be very clear about what I'm saying. I'm not saying that the Judeo-cide (the historical event) was always taking place, or that the world is the same after it happened. What I am saying is that, in the poetic naming of that event, it becomes apparent that the Holocaust was always taking place: that language--or, at least, poetic language--is in its very nature holocaustal (Derrida, 1986, 1993). Of course, there is Adorno's famous statement about lyric poetry after Auschwitz. And I wouldn't say that he was completely wrong. But I think that Adorno, in that moment, was really only expressing a kind of extreme version of liberal ideology. And his statement--whatever its original merits--

has been turned into a shibboleth of Western liberalism in the late twentieth century.

It is imagined--in the liberal idealist myth--that, before the Judeo-cide, there was a harmonious world where sign and referent were unitary; where there was nothing problematic or difficult about the act of witnessing; where the human subject was whole and humans and nature were indivisible. History, in this myth, is seen as something alien; a force from outside that caused a fall or separation. And even some of those who recognize this as a myth, as a world that never really existed--Lawrence Langer, for example--are still nostalgic for a time when at least the illusion of wholeness was possible (Langer, 1991). Never mind the fact that this metaphysics was an important part of Nazi ideology, or that it was precisely the attempt to make the world pure and magical 'again'--to restore the aura--that resulted in the genocide; a genocide that these liberals supposedly want us never to forget.

One recent example of this liberal pathos was Caryl Phillips's long poem about Auschwitz and Hiroshima, 'The Angel of History' (Phillips, 1994), the first line of which reads: 'There are times when the child seems delicate, as if he had not yet crossed into the world' (p.3) Later in the poem, Phillips invokes a pastoral, pre-urban world with the lines: 'And the fields, aren't the fields changed by what happened?/How can the fields continue as simple fields' (p.12). The image of the field is recurrent in

Forche's poem. In fact, you could say the entire poem is situated 'Here, in this open field, that can never be a field again' (p.62).

Forche's poem, which is really an example of the most base sentimentality, actually received many long and complex reviews in numerous journals. One article actually reviewed it along with Graham's 'Materialism', as if the two poets were moving in parallel directions. But I think Graham presents a materialist counterpoint to Forche, especially in an uncollected poem called--appropriately enough--'The Field' (Graham, 1996) a poem which is an attempt to describe the effect of looking at Anselm Kiefer's painting 'The Order of the Angels', which in turn is a painting of a field near a death-camp. Graham's poem begins with the lines: 'Before, there is this field/And after, too, we are in the same field' (p.126).

I'm not saying--and I don't think that Graham is saying--that the world is the same, that the real field is the same as it was before. What I am trying to say, however, is that in the field of poetics the holocaust reveals what was always there: the child was always crossed into the world: or the child is always crossing into the field, perpetually, and the world crossing into the child. Lyric poetry--whether or not it was aware of the fact--was and is always taking place 'after Auschwitz.'

And the problematic dream of an original crossing, the problematic dream of before and after, was not any less

problematic before the Judeo-cide. The problem is apparent, for example, in Georg Trakl's 1912 poem 'Kaspar Hauser Song' (Trakl, 1989) in which Trakl attempts to narrate the story of Kaspar Hauser as an originary fall from the pastoral to the urban, from pre-history to history, and from silence to language. But what emerges in the poem is a still-born mute recognition of the impossibility of that narrative.

The poem begins in the past tense, with the line: 'He truly loved the sun which sank crimson down the hill' (p.93). And it ends with this line: 'Silver, the head of the unborn sank down,' an aporatic line--how does something that was never born 'sink down'?--which marks the realization that the world the poem wants to invoke was always in the past tense, that it never in fact existed. In light of this context--I think--the fact that the real Kaspar Hauser was often referred to as 'the child of Europe' takes on a different significance.

Anyway, I think what I'm trying--with great difficulty--to say is this: thought and language are always astonished. The Holocaust--which, remember, is different from the Judeo-cide--only makes this astonishment more apparent. In describing the condition of 'post-modernity,' Fredric Jameson (Jameson, 1991, p.1-55) uses the example of a scene from *The Man Who Fell To earth*, the film in which David Bowie plays an alien character, a kind of 'post-modern' Kaspar Hauser. In the scene, the alien is trying to watch--to witness--hundreds of television screens at once, and Jameson reads this as a

kind of allegory for the position of the human subject in late capitalism. But, I would say that the scene represents a condition that is always there; although we may only become aware of it, and it may only become a theoretical preoccupation, within the context of late capitalism.

So this process or condition is--simultaneously--historicizable and non-historicizable. The effect of the Holocaust may be to further distort the syntax of Celan's poems. But what results is a hyper-awareness of a distortion that was always taking place. The position of the child in relation to the bicycle--to return to the example I used earlier--only differs in degree from the position of Celan in relation to the Judeo-cide. And I don't mean that to sound at all cynical or flippant. Both instances, both utterances--the child's and Celan's--are witness to the fact that language is astonishment; language is stunned by the world; language is fascination. Poetics, in turn, is born from a fascination with language. But it is also--at the same time--born from an awareness of the fact that language is always aware, and from a fascination with this awareness.

Crossing Time

F.P.- Let me ask a question which posits a different version of materialist poetics. Your version seems to be about the material dimension of language, and language's relation to the world, and an attempt to engage and record those

tensions. So that the Holocaust becomes an event which, in its poetic naming, opens up a trauma that's always already there.

But what if we thought of a poetics--a materialist poetics--that is different from the empiricist-realist aesthetic model, but is still a productive one. In other words, can we imagine a materialist poetics producing something? There is a way in which what you're describing is a kind of naming of what already exists, and it's a naming and a mis-naming, always mis-knowing, always missing and mourning. But why couldn't a materialist poetics--rather than re-visiting old wounds, and re-opening them--be a productive one? And I don't mean productive in the sense that it's happy...just that it produces new senses, new relationships, new perceptions of language. Why wouldn't that be a materialist poetics?

M.N.- I'm not sure that it wouldn't. And I'm not sure that a poetics of re-opening wounds and illuminating traumas is necessarily antithetical to a poetics that produces something. Although I'm not sure that I would refer to the something that is produced as 'new.'

What you seem to be naming, in your question, is the problem of hope. And the figure who--in light of that problem--comes to my mind is Benjamin, because there seems to always be a kind of tension in Benjamin's writings between

the two kinds of poetics that you described: a tension between a mournful poetics and a productive one.

So there is this unresolved tension. And there is also-- I think--an ambivalence on Benjamin's part when it comes to the idea of hope. At certain moments, he describes a kind of messianic or anticipatory consciousness. But--often in the same moments--he describes messianism as the absence of anticipation or fore-sight; or, he anticipates the past, rather than the future. One obvious example of this problem is his last thesis on the philosophy of history, where Benjamin draws a parallel between his formulation of historical materialism and the Judaic prohibition against 'investigating the future' (Benjamin, 1969, p.264).

It is almost as if hope, or, rather, one version of hope, is itself a kind of fore-closure. And so, for Benjamin, historical materialism involves a constant haunting and re-visiting of old sites, rather than looking into the future. But I don't know how that turning toward the past can ever be reconciled with his more Brechtian moments. Although I may be wrong to think of the two as contradictory, because in Benjamin there is a way in which past, present, and future--and space and time--are all merged and warped. For example, you asked about 'new relationships, new perceptions'...but if you think of a Benjaminian constellation: is it a birth or a death? It may appear to us as new, at a particular historical instance, under specific conditions, but the stars may be dead at the moment we first see them...

F.P.- ...But, I think that, in asking the question, I meant to posit a sort of Brechtian poetics, without the auratic pathos of hope: a materialist poetics that is generative, but not exactly hopeful. A poetics that situates itself in the 'bad new days.' And something not necessarily hopeful, but other, is being made and generated out of this new poetic material.

M.N.- Well, that's difficult. I'm certainly very sympathetic to that Brechtian idea, and I'm not even certain if these two versions of materialist poetics are mutually exclusive. Actually, I relied very much on some Brechtian ideas, like the idea of the 'alienation effect.' And I think there is something 'other' generated in the poetics that I described. But I think there is a difference, and it may be that this difference turns out to be irreconcilable. The difference is this: in the materialist poetics that I tried to formulate, something 'other' is generated, but that 'something' is really an awareness of the fact that 'something other' always was and is being generated.

F.P.- But what would you say to someone who said, 'I want a materialist poetics in the marxist sense'? And by that I mean a praxis, a labor which takes material, and works on that material as something new. And this transformation of material through labor produces a product, a product which will now be the measure of our labor.

M.N.- These days, I'd say 'good luck': that version of materialism has been out-sourced or tranferred south of the border. But, really, that's a difficult question for me to answer. I realize that the idea of materialist poetics which I've tried to articulate differs in many ways from what you referred to as 'materialist poetics in the marxist sense.' But, at the same time, I don't think that the poetic materialism that I've described would be possible without the other, more immediately marxist version.

And I think that there are similarities, as well. Benjamin, for instance, says that 'the past has left images of itself in literary texts that are comparable to those which light imprints on a photo-sensitive plate' and he describes historiography as a process of 'development' (Benjamin, cited in Buck-Morss, 1989, p.250). By 'development' he of course does not mean progress, but rather the development of those images and their emergence into the visible.

And this historiographic project of 'development' isn't all that different from the poetic project that I've been attempting to describe. Bruno Schulz developed the images that illustrate his stories by collecting damaged, unused photoplates, scratching pictures directly into the surface, and then exposing them to the sun. I think Schulz's practice is very Benjaminian in nature. And I also think that it presents a useful allegory for a materialist poetics. Trakl and Celan expose the damaged silver photo-plate of Goethe and

Holderlin (and Rilke) to the light. Graham does the same thing to Whitman; she develops the negative spaces. And what remains is an emulsion-burn. That is the hope of the praxis I'm describing: that it will continually develop and illuminate those traumas; that those traumas will be brought up and burned into the surface.

F.P.- But if this is--as you said earlier and seem to be saying again now--an intractable and permanent condition, then where is the hope in that?

M.N.- Well, first of all I'd separate what we're talking about from what concerns most people--including myself--in daily life. Obviously, everyone has to have some kind of hope in order to live. But our discussion is taking place on a different level of abstraction, and within that context I am perfectly comfortable saying that there is no hope in the materialist poetics that I've articulated. Or, there is no hope in the traditional sense of the word. There is a rejection of one kind of hope. And yet I'm not, in any way, advocating a negative theology or an infantile dejection or hopelessness. Materialist poetics finds its own version of hope in a refusal of any kind of fore-closure...

F.P.-...And an opening, say?

M.N.- Yes. And you see this in Celan's poems. In
'Psalm' (Celan, 1988, p.175) for instance:

No one moulds us again out of earth and clay,
no one conjures our dust.
No one.

Praised be your name, no one.
For your sake
we shall flower.
Towards
you,

A nothing
we were, are, shall
remain, flowering:
the nothing-, the
no one's rose.

With
our pistil soul-bright,
with our stamen heaven-ravaged,
our corolla red
with the crimson word which we sang
over, O over
the thorn.

And the same kind of opening can be seen--in a much more extreme form--after what you might call Celan's epistemological break, in the poems that make up the 'Breathturn' cycle, particularly the untitled poem in which he describes the poetic act as the casting of a net 'in a river north of the future' (Celan, 1995, p.61). So the poem defines itself as an impossibility, an aporia. There is no such place as 'north of the future': it is literally beyond recognition. And the attempt to articulate a description of that place results in syntactical distortions and convolutions...

F.P.- But, suddenly the words you're using make this moment sound utopian: a river north of the future, a kind of no-place in the utopian sense. You seem to be thinking of this moment as something in--or beyond--the future. But, couldn't it instead be conceived of as an opening or clearing away or undoing of the present?

M.N.- Yes. What I meant to do, using the example of Celan, was re-define the utopian moment as precisely that moment which reveals absences in the present. And I think this definition of utopia has some resonances in the concept of permanent revolution, or in Benjamin's messianism, and certainly in Derrida's current pre-occupation with the concept of non-arrival and messianics without a messiah (Derrida, 1993; 1994).

Each time Celan casts the net, it will result in failure. It is a project that defines its goal as failure even before it begins. All this so as not to fore-close. And that is the 'breathturn', the utopian moment: the hope of remaining permanently, perpetually turning and open. Benjamin uses the kitsch example of a child attempting to grasp the moon: each time the child reaches, he/she fails. But, each time, his/her motion reveals something about the mechanism of grasping.

F.P.- Let me ask you this, then. In terms of this mechanism, this aporatic structure that the poem reveals; and, also,

thinking of this structure as something not gotten over, but in some sense repeated. The examples that you have used have been primarily modern ones. And I was wondering what you would say if I suggested that this process is also taking place in Shelley, and in certain ways in Keats...

M.N.-... 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is certainly a proto-typical example of the attempt to name and sing an object.

F.P.- And, for instance, there are moments in Emily Dickenson of an attempt to 'traverse the interval,' and this interval is no-place, really, and there is the same sense of unmediated suspension that you find in Celan. So, I would ask, what is the historical status of this poetic event? Can you say: 'I see it in Jorie Graham, I see it in Emily Dickenson, I see it in John Keats, etc..' And, if so, what is the relationship of that--of that kind of poetic naming of what seems to be a repeated aporia--to historical transformation? Or, is this simply a transhistorical argument that you're making? Is your argument really a kind of refusal of history? Is your 'materialist poetics' really a kind of aversion to historical change?

M.N.- Actually, I don't see why such a poetics wouldn't be perpetually open to historical transformation, rather than trying to protect itself from history or from the idea of history. And I don't see why it isn't possible to look at a

poem--or certain specific poems--as simultaneously embedded in its historical context and, at the same time, exploding that context, like a land-mine. As Celan said in his Bremen speech: 'the poem does not stand outside time...it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time, but across, not above' (Celan, 1986, p.34) And, I would add, time--or one way of conceptualizing time--is crossed up by the poem. As Benjamin wrote: 'Even though chronology places regularity above permanence, it cannot prevent heterogeneous, conspicuous fragments from remaining within it' (Benjamin, 1969, p.184).

F.P.- But I would still ask: how do you historicize this? Or, are you historicizing enough? If the same thing is happening in Jorie Graham that's happening in Keats, or--as you've suggested in your discussion of the Narcissus myth--in Ovid, doesn't that represent an enormous refusal of history?

M.N.- I don't think it's a refusal of history. I think it's a refusal of one way of reading history. In other words: it's a refusal of one form of historiography. Metaphysical-idealist historiography looks at a poem and asks: will this work stand the test of time? It is presumed that the poem is out of time, that the poem contains something universal. So, time is actually seen as a threat to the poem, as something that will erode and degrade the meaning contained there. And the poem is then judged by how well it resists erosion.

The impulse at work in that metaphysical historiography is extremely conservative. But I think that the same impulse is there even in most versions of marxist poetics. One can see it, for instance, in the most simplistic empiricist-positivist versions of historicism, which ask of a poem: fifty years from now, will this artifact tell us something about the historical context in which it was written? So, the content of the question is different, but its form is unchanged: it is based in the same basic set of assumptions about time and space.

And I think the same is true even in some of the more radical formulations of marxist historiography and aesthetics: in Adorno's writings, for example. Adorno asks a more complex question: he wants to know how the form of a poem dialectically refracts and distorts the image of the social context in which it was written. This is certainly a more complicated idea of the poem and its relation to history than either bourgeois metaphysics or empiricist historicism presents us with, but in the end I don't think the questions it asks are significantly different. For Adorno, the poem is a kind of prism: you hold it up to the light of its own historical context, and see how that context bends and warps in the mediation. It is a fascinating way to look at a poem, but ultimately I think it leaves the usual way of conceptualizing time and space essentially unaltered.

Benjamin is--I think--by far the most radical, unusual theorist of this century when it comes to re-thinking the

relationship of time and space, and the relationship of historiography and poetics. Benjamin looked at all poems--at all texts--as artifacts. Yet, at the same time, I think he looked, in an almost prayerful way, for texts that--in their form--break continuity, break a certain way of thinking about history. So, all texts are artifacts, fossils. But there are texts that are something else as well, something other. Almost every formulation of poetics, whether metaphysical or empiricist, asks of a text: how will this work stand the test of time? But Benjamin asks a question that differs in both form and content: will time--as it is usually conceived of--stand the test of this space?

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