

**Review of Michael G. Levine, *A Weak Messianic Power: Figures to Come in Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan*  
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In *A Weak Messianic Power*, Michael G. Levine offers subtle and insightful readings of the spectral figures that appear in the writings of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Paul Celan. Using Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* as the basis of a temporal structure referred to as the "messianic," which he describes as a "a time to come," Levine demonstrates how Benjamin, Derrida, and Celan present "a time in which future and past do not so much come together as come about one another, doing so in a way that circumvents conventional modalities of presence and hold time open to the coming of another" (6). Levine's explication of "a time to come" invites biblical scholars to consider how a limit-concept such as the "messianic" suggests new ways of interpreting the lapses and erasures within a text, as representing an excess that is at once arresting and productive.

Levine, a professor of German and Comparative Literature at Rutgers University in New Jersey, contributes here to the conversation of "messianism without religion" that has been a vibrant topic among philosophers and other critical theorists for several years. As David Ferris explains, the paradoxical structure of the messianic, in its being fulfilled by not being fulfilled, "discloses the openness in the failed claim to achieve the absolute event of the Messiah" (Ferris 2014, 74-76). As a concept it therefore represents a general structure of experience pertaining to the limits of language and consciousness, a limit addressed by critical theorists in ways that depart from the messianic as it functions in biblical texts. Levine does not attend to the messianic as a theological concept but rather emphasizes how as a temporal structure it corresponds to the psychoanalytic terms of restoration and restatement of the French "return to Freud" in the work of Lacan, Laplanche, and Derrida. For him it provides a framework for describing that which "comes between" and is unnamed in the work of Benjamin, Celan, and Derrida.

Levine's first chapter serves as introduction, situating his analysis within the context of Benjamin's *Theses*. Levine first focuses on Benjamin's concept of the "hidden index" by which the past is "referred to redemption" through a "weak messianic power." All that is unrealized in the past manifests in the present by its possibility of being realized, which Benjamin identified as a "secret agreement" (or as Levine argues is better translated, as an "appointment"). Levine writes, "what speaks to us out of the past, what summons us to a secret rendezvous with it, is strictly speaking that which will have never belonged to it or that which will have belonged only as a missed possibility and unrealized potential" (3). In the context of Benjamin's first thesis, which pictures a "little hunchback" of theology, the redemption Benjamin describes is that of a missed or distorted theology, one of "hunchback" possibilities. "What remains unactualized ... stays with us, remaining not merely as a lingering echo but as a secretly insisting appeal," Levine writes (3). Because this communication does not pass through the normal channels, it is a

kind of speech addressed to the unconscious, communicating only through the lapses and slips of the Other. This "speech," as it were, therefore proposes a way of thinking about time other than as a linear continuum, with the present the transition between past and future, and it carries a redemptive potential in its address of what is unrealized in the past.

The implications of Levine's emphasize on temporality crystallize early on, in chapter two, where he examines how Benjamin uses the prefix *mit-* in three pivotal terms, and how he shifts from the present-perfect tense to the subjunctive in the key second thesis mentioned above. Levine notes that the repetition of the prefix and the tense change indicate "something else hanging in the air," a kind of reverberating call that cannot be ignored (16). The signifier *mit-* continues to resonate in later sections of the text, which Levine argues is associated with Benjamin's concept of a constellation, a term he explains by way of Derrida and Celan who also use the idea of constellation to signify an arrest in thought, a moment that is blasted out of the course of history by its intersection in thought with another moment. As Levine demonstrates how Derrida and Celan interpret Benjamin's thought, he illuminates how all three thinkers express that time can be opened to another order. "Such openings may be said to split the present moment—understood as a positive, discrete unit of time, be it an hour, minute, second, or 'now'" (25). Freed from conscious control, "pent up historical energies are released and we are given fleeting access to a certain historical unconscious" (25). As a concrete example of such a phenomenon, he describes the testimony of the Holocaust survivor K-Zetnik, who lost consciousness on the stand at the Eichmann Trial in 1961. Drawing on the work of Shoshana Felman, he notes that this moment in the trial "gives place to the silent shadow or negative of the proceedings, doing so in such a way that presences and voices of the trial are suddenly set in counterpoint to its absences and silences" (35).

Chapters three and four focus on Paul Celan and Jacques Derrida and their intersecting interests and debts to Benjamin's thought, represented best by Derrida's reading of Celan's poems, which is the subject of chapter four. Chapter three centers on Celan's *Meridian* speech, in which he accepted a literary award named for Georg Büchner. On this occasion Celan took the opportunity to describe how a shibboleth—a word used to describe words unconsciously offered—can open up a text to alternative meanings. He then offers a reading of Büchner's plays and prose as conveying traumatic experiences through certain impasses in speech, a characteristic, as Levine emphasizes, that shapes Celan's works as well. As Levine states, both Büchner and Celan defined the human as characterized by a "lack of self-presence," which allows a "constitutive openness to the other ... [and a way] of coming upon another in the very place of a sovereign self, upon the uncanny otherness of this self" (41). This idea was compelling to Derrida, who in "Shibboleth: For Paul Celan," describes, according to Levine, how the lack of self-presence creates in writing "tears and rents of unstitchable wounds, the traces and unfillable voids and unfathomable silences" (12). From the context of Celan's work, Derrida discusses the trope of circumcision to indirectly address identity politics—rites of inclusion and exclusion—and how circumcision relates to a "closed circle of traumatic repetition, related in its turn to the circular dates and anniversaries in Celan's poetry" (12). Here Derrida demonstrates the instability of the Celan text, with its complex networks of relationships that leave its meaning unsettled, always open to the

incoming of the Other, and always disrupting time in a linear continuum. As further elaboration, in chapter five, Levine offers a reading of Celan's poems in their connection to the poet's readings of Kafka. Celan adapted Kafka's work into his own, "opening his language and poetry to the untranslatable violence of an unspeakable and irrepressible pain ... a pain that cannot be simply silenced or voiced" (96).

Chapter six is a fitting conclusion, with its focus on a poem Celan wrote for his son, Eric, that exemplifies Levine's spectral figures that accompany a messianic conception of time. Celan's first son, François, had died shortly after birth, and the poet and his wife were deeply marked by this loss. In the summer of 1968, Celan wrote three poems for his second son, Eric; two in German, his native language, and one in French, the language of his adopted home. The one in French was never published, and it includes the deictic "this time," prompting Levine to ask whether the poem refers to a Benjaminian temporal index in which the past is redeemed in the present. Celan suffered from debilitating mental breakdowns in the period preceding the poem's composition, and he wrote in a letter to his wife that poetry was demanding of him that he re-perform the "sacrifice of Abraham" (99). Levine interprets this context as indicating that poetry directed an address to Celan, one that he could not ignore, and that Celan wrote the poem in a period fraught with grief and anxiety. The central lines of the poem are most telling and are the focus of Levine's analysis. Celan writes, "The hour, minuted, seconds you/Eric. One has to scale this time. Your father/shoulders you." Levine interprets the lines as figuring "minutes carved into the hour and the seconds scored into the minutes as little notches, as small hand- and footholds by which one might get a grip" (112). As Levine reads them, the poem's lines implore Eric to dig cuts into the face of time so that he might be able to make it his own, and that Eric is not alone in this task. In reading Celan through Benjamin, Levine highlights how Celan depicts time as that which can be grasped and through which additional divisions might be made. Thus, Levine writes, calling upon Benjamin's use of the messianic, "Slight is the adjustment the Messiah might make, strait is the gate through which he might enter" (114). In leaving open the possibility of the coming of another, the poem—in addressing the living son—reveals the spectre of the son that was lost.

*A Weak Messianic Power* is a powerfully evocative reading of Benjamin's *Theses* in the writings of Celan and Derrida. While Levine presupposes a familiarity with Celan and Derrida that few outside of select circles possess, his readings illuminate Benjamin's thought with a depth and precision that makes the book a valuable resource for any scholar considering Benjamin as an interlocutor. In particular, Levine's development of spectral figures in relation to the messianic concept suggests fruitful areas of research with respect to trauma theory and the Bible. What Levine writes of Celan's poem for Eric could work as well for, say, the Gospel of Mark: "the poem is held open in suspense, and it is through such fissures—through the very failure of the text to be one, to be whole, together, complete ... that it leaves itself open to the coming of another" (116).

## Bibliography

Ferris, David, 2014. "Agamben and the Messianic: The Slightest of Differences." Pages 73-92 in *Messianic Thought Outside Theology*. Edited by Anna Glazova and Paul North. New York: Fordham University Press.



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