

The Afterlife of a Text in Walter Benjamin's Theory of Translation

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ABSTRACT: Walter Benjamin proposes that a work of art does not belong to a specific time; rather it is transient. A work of art has a '*temporal effect*' which is considered as the 'context' of the work in which it has been written. The 'context' cannot be reconstructed to be the same as what once existed; it is constructed. Translator's job is to recreate the life of the original work from one language to another. Every work enters into relation with its translation and is constructed anew. The priority of translation over work of art for Benjamin is due to the fact that the 'linguistic creation' in translation is the only thing that can represent the truth content of the work or its afterlife. This paper tries to apply Benjamin's theory of translation to Maurice Blanchot's "Madness of the Day".

Keywords: absolute awareness, afterlife, innermost being, material content, truth content.

Walter Benjamin, the German critic and philosopher, whose thinking provides a revolutionary criticism of culture and tradition, argues that a text does not have a single unified meaning. In this regard, Benjamin (2002) argues that "every contemporary critique comprehends in the work more the moving truth than the resting truth, more the temporal effect than the eternal being" (p. 298). It is suggested that 'the moving truth' is not a single one that is referred to as the 'resting'. The 'moving truth' also does not imply that every work or text is part of a single 'eternal being'. The truth of the work of art without an origin or an end is an otherness which is transient in the sense that it is always created through the heterogeneous relation between one work and another. Every work that enters into this relation with other works is constructed anew. Therefore, it does not belong to a specific time or eternity; rather it is transient and has a 'temporal effect' and not an 'eternal' one. Radnoti (1989), who explains Benjamin's ideas, considers the 'temporal effect' as the 'context' of a work in which it has been written. According to Radnoti, "the 'context' cannot be reconstructed to be the same as what once existed" (p. 129); it is constructed. Since the truth of the work, or 'the transcendental signified'¹ in Derrida's scheme, is dispersed, the context of the present reading of the work could be the hidden context of that work which has remained concealed when it has been written; the work is actually open with 'fluid borders' (Radnoti, 1989). Hence, the present reading constructs the past work. In this sense, the boundary of time as the past and the future is blurred and the process of construction continues. The work as 'the other' always calls and demands us to be in dialogue with it.

According to Benjamin, a work of art is characterized by the truth content and the material content. The former is the work's subsequent perception in different historical periods. The latter is the dominant traditional interpretations. Benjamin (2002) by using a simile describes the material content

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¹ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Continuum, 2004), P. 19. The 'transcendental signified' is the possibility of thinking of a concept that has signification in and of itself, the concept that is Present for thought and independent of a relation to language, the relation to the system of signifiers.

“as wood and ash in a burning funeral pyre and the truth content as the flame” (p. 298). The material content is what the text is about and its historical context, whereas the truth content is the work's afterlife that is continued by the dialogue of the writer, the work, the reader, and other works:

The concrete realities rise up before the eyes of the beholder all the more distinctly the more they die out in the world. With this, however, to judge by appearances, the material content and the truth content, united at the beginning of a work's history, set themselves apart from each other in the course of its duration, because the truth content always remains the same extent hidden as the material content comes to the fore. More and more, therefore, the interpretation of what is striking and curious—that is, the material content—becomes a prerequisite for any later critics. (Benjamin, 2002, p. 297)

In terms of the material content, commentators open the work to the subjective interpretations in the way that the work is exhausted and familiarized. Todd (1989) explains that “we may unconsciously accept the interpretation of the art world authorities—church dignitaries, princes, collectors, artists, publishers, gallery owners, critics, and university lecturers depending on the social and political context” (p. 109).

Here it is being suggested that if one particular mode of perception in one tradition closes any understanding of a work of art, that is, the material content, this does not mean the work has become meaningless. The language of art is open to the subsequent response of audiences. The meaning of the work undergoes a change in its afterlife. For Benjamin, this is considered as the truth content, the changing modes of reception by the posterity. Todd continues to explain that:

It is rather historically conditioned changes in the modes of perception, common throughout a society or an historical period and provoked by wide-ranging social and technological developments, that are crucial in constituting and changing a work's meaning. (p. 111)

The historical changes in the modes of perception help the work in the past to be opened to the present. Some works might seem to be of no relevance to the contemporary time, but they, in fact, share with the present the conflicts, struggles, and problems of the artist in the past.

Benjamin uses the word “afterlife” in his essay, ‘The Task of Translator’, when he argues that translation is the afterlife of the original work. This means that translation reveals the truth content of the work. For Benjamin (1973), the work's afterlife or the truth content reveals itself in translation as a “higher sphere not in transcendental meaning” (p.72). Benjamin distinguishes between what a word means and the way it means:

In the words *Brot* and *pain*, what is meant is the same, but the way of meaning it is not. This difference in the way of meaning permits the word *Brot* to mean something other to a German than what the word *pain* means to a Frenchman. (p. 75)

It is implied that the meaning of a word even within one language is different for those who speak it. The change in the way of meaning of words when they are rendered in another language is actually the creation or the afterlife. This broadens the scope of translation within one language. A word's meaning differs from one person to another. It involves the sense which comes with it. This sense varies for different people. Translation also involves an act of reading as Schleiermacher (1992) uses the phrase “a different temperament and mind” (p. 36) to show the transformation of meaning in translation. According to Schleiermacher, “how a worn-out old word in the target language does correspond to a new word in the original” concerns the method in which the translator leaves the writer and brings the reader to the original work. Here, the foreignness of the original must be visible in the reader's language.

Another issue to be considered is that how a translator's thought and expression would have emerged if he/she had originally been accustomed to think and express himself/herself in another language. This is best exemplified when someone writes an article on Derrida's idea of unconditional forgiveness in English language which is his/her foreign language, and then he/she translates it into his/her mother tongue. According to Schleiermacher (1992), if one's thought is inseparable from his/her language, so how is it possible to separate a foreign thought from its language and express it in another language (pp. 49-50)? It shows that a translator's thought and expression are in conflict with a writer's thought and expression in another language. This conflict is reconciled if the translator

empties himself/herself of his own thought and expression, which is practically impossible. Here, we must distinguish the thought and expression from the act of interpretation. In Benjamin's view, the former is the truth content and the latter is the material content. In the realm of the truth content, the thought and expression of a translator are in conflict with the original work. The thought and the expression, for Benjamin (1999), are classed as language: "all expression, in so far as it is a communication of contents of mind, is to be classed as language. And expression, by its whole innermost nature, is certainly to be understood only as *language*" (p. 36). It is implied that the truth content or the afterlife is characterized by the act of language. In this sense, translation is at the service of the 'linguistic creation' and goes beyond the transmission of the subject matter of the original work. According to Benjamin (1973, p. 74), translation, therefore, is:

so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the especial mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.

Translator by working on language reveals the creative power of meaning from one language to another. For Benjamin (1973), translation has priority over work of art because the 'linguistic creation' in translation is the only thing that can tear out the truth content of the work, its afterlife. Derrida (2002) describes this afterlife as "the survival of a text that is a legacy" (p. 104). The myth of tower of Babel is the myth of the inadequacy of one language compared to another, of one translation to another. The tower exhibits the incompleteness and impossibility.

Benjamin (1973) argues that "a literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility" (p. 78). This means that meaning is not possible to be reproduced. Here, what Benjamin wants to propose is that meaning is the result of syntax and as the syntax of the foreign language is different from the original, the meaning is not reproduced but it is created in the translation. He, therefore, argues that "the literal rendering, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must incorporate the original's mode of signification" (p. 73). Benjamin's position implies that the literal rendering produces the signification of the original rather than reproducing it. The literal rendering has the task of continuation of the work of art. This rendering is the "linguistic creation" of translation which is understood by looking at the way language acts. The "literal rendering" presents the act of syntax in language. In this sense, the translation renders the syntax of the original rather than meaning.

In other words, for Benjamin (1973), the translation and the original work are like the fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together. These fragments never form a total configuration but they remain fragmentary in the creative process that is done by translation. The translation and the work are parts of what he calls the "pure language" (p. 75). A kinship is established among all languages as the ending point or the 'pure language' that is its beginning because it is actually the renewed life of language, the afterlife. The 'pure language' becomes an enduring renewal and creative process that exists within one language and from one language to another. Translator's task is to recreate the life of the original work from one language to another, that is to say, the enacting of the 'pure language,' the afterlife. On the fragmentary sense of the pure language that mainly implies the creation, Blanchot (1997) explains that when a work is well translated, it can be claimed that "it is hard to believe that it is translation" or "it is truly the same work" (p. 58). In the first case, the translation becomes a new work and the original is effaced. In the second, the originality of both languages is removed and they become one language. In Blanchot's view, in both cases the originality is effaced and only the difference is remained as a new work being different from the other. This is the task of translation which produces difference or the afterlife in Benjamin's words. The new created works by translation are related to one another fragmentarily. This would be the fragmentary pure language. Therefore, if one reads a translation, the translated text is part of the original one. It is actually outside the category of original/translation that involves the repetition of subject matter from the original text to the translation.

Blanchot's "Madness of the Day" in translation

Maurice Blanchot's short story "Madness of the Day" can be considered as an illustration of Benjamin's argument on translation. The 'I', as the one who speaks in this text, sees some scenes as he/she calls the day. The 'I' tries to illustrate some experiences he/she has had in the day and express

how he/she enters into a new state of being by seeing the day. The 'I' is outside of the realm of memory with an empty past because he/she says "as reason returned to me, memory came with it" (Blanchot, 1981, p. 6). The 'I' sees the scene which opens onto the 'outside' or the 'beyond' which are without location in terms of time or place. The 'I' sees something in this 'outside' or 'beyond'. He/she is outside time and place. He/she begins by expressing his/her feeling after the experience of seeing the day. He/she feels himself/herself in a state between dying and living with a great joy. In this immense pleasure, he/she is neither conscious in the sense that he/she has knowledge about himself/herself and the outside world nor is ignorant. The 'I' is neither learned nor ignorant, and this implies a state between being and non-being. The light of the day makes neither visible nor invisible. To put it differently, it is neither illuminating nor obscuring. It can be implied that the 'I' is not necessarily the narrator in the sense that he/she is not in possession of a self when he/she sees the day.

There is a phrase in the first page in parenthesis said by the 'I': "perhaps any minute now" (Blanchot, 1981, p. 5). This phrase shows the state of the 'I' when he/she experiences death. This phrase is ambiguous with some possible meanings. First, it can mean dying perhaps in any unpredictable minute, perhaps now. Second, it can mean dying in any minute which is now; that is, any minute in the past, present, or future never passes and the 'I' always lives in the absolute present. Third, the phrase may say 'any minute in now' or 'any minute of now'. All possible meanings imply that 'now' consists of any minute or endless minutes. According to the phrase, the death happens in an instant. When the phrase is rendered into Persian, it literary becomes "شاید هر لحظه اکنون". This translated phrase can have the three possible meanings explained in English. Yet, there is another possible meaning which the order of words in the translated phrase produces. Most of the Persian speakers in Iran are Muslims and are familiar with a religious notion in Quran. This notion says that when the human asks God when the doomsday is, God replies that you may now experience it while you are living but you are not aware of that. It means perhaps you are experiencing it 'any minute now'. The translated phrase may have this meaning too. This fourth possible meaning cannot be understood by the phrase in the original language. The syntax in the translated phrase makes the fourth meaning possible. Perhaps, this fourth meaning illustrates better the situation of the 'I' when he/she says he/she is neither learned nor ignorant. The experience in the fourth meaning shows that one is ignorant of what he/she experiencing and at the same time he/she knows that he/she is living. This state also clarifies the religious notion in Quran. The communication between Blanchot's text and the verse in Quran reveals that the one who lives in this state is not ignorant but he/she lives in the 'absolute awareness'. God, in Quran, invites the human to be absolutely aware of himself/herself which is the state in which the 'I' in Blanchot's text lives. Here, the 'absolute awareness' is not self-consciousness by which we mean we have acquired knowledge of the self and the world outside. The human should live in the 'absolute awareness,' outside self-consciousness, since self-consciousness is nothing but an illusion which the human has made for himself/herself.¹ What opens in the realm of outside self-consciousness is the impossibility which introduces the *other*. In other words, the *other* is the invention of impossibility. It is the invention as a movement of affirmation in order to make a space for an inventiveness open to the wholly 'other'. This point is evident when the 'I' continues to say that it does not matter whatever his/her past has been. He/she does not care who he/she has been. He/she feels that he/she is alive in this new state and he/she is dead when this state fades. According to Benjamin's notion of afterlife of text, the linguistic creation in Persian produces a new text by translating Blanchot's text. This is the creative power of syntax which produces a new meaning. Moreover, a communication happens between the two texts in which a new notion is created. It is a 'new notion' because what comes out of this communication cannot be simply a description of the two texts.

¹ This notion belongs to Hegel. For him, the formation of ego in the process of self-consciousness is at the price of denying external world and silencing them toward an ideal which is called spirit or absolute knowledge. This ego divides itself in two by positing something other than itself in order to leads to consciousness which is called *Aufhebung*. In this process of dividing, the ego starts making concept of external world and of itself which is the rational order that permeates all of being. Therefore, *Aufhebung* is reckoned to be being because humankind attains knowledge or consciousness of itself and the world. See, Alexander Kojève (1969). *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, ed. by Allan Bloom, trans. by James H. Nicholas, Jr. New York, London: Basic Books. See also Jacques Derrida (1990). *Glas*, trans. by John P. Leavey, Jr, and Richard Rand. Lincoln and London: The University of Nebraska Press.

In the second page of the text when, the 'I' sees the day, he/she says he/she goes mad. He/she says: "only my innermost being was mad" (Blanchot, 1981, p.6). The phrase 'my innermost being' means the innermost being of my being. In other words, there is an innermost being in my being. It seems that there are some layers in being. When the phrase is translated into Persian, it becomes "برونی ترین بودنم". We find the possible meaning in English here in the translated phrase. But the translated phrase in Persian also means my being itself is very inner. According to what argued as the 'absolute awareness,' being is very inner when it experiences the 'absolute awareness'. Being is very inner; it is neither to be nor not to be. The image in this meaning is unimaginable. It reminds us of the famous question which Hamlet asks: *to be or not to be, that is the question*. Perhaps this new unimaginable image is the reply to Hamlet's question. This kind of image which is created by the syntax in Persian draws our attention to Blanchot's (1993) reading of a phrase 'as vast as night and light' in one of Baudelaire's poems. Blanchot writes that:

Thus in Baudelaire's work, the word 'vast' becomes a figure on its own, and suffices to carry the entire 'force of speech'. *As vast as night and light*. In this case, where would the image be, if there were one? In the word *vast*, where night spreads to attain its nocturnal dimension, where light destines itself to light by way of the always unilluminated expanse, yet without night and clarity mixing or merging, being never 'vast' enough to measure the birth in this word of the image, which is each time the entire presence of this counter- world that is, perhaps, the imaginary. (p. 324)

The image of 'vastness' in the phrase is made possible by the opposition of darkness and lightness. As Clark (2005) explains, "night becomes 'vast' by banishing day, while light, conversely, becomes 'vast' by banishing darkness" (p.111). Night and day attain their vastness without merging together. They cannot show 'vastness' either without each other or together. According to Blanchot (1993), they never become 'vast' enough to show the vastness of the image of 'vast'. The image becomes so unimaginable that the words night and day cannot determine. The image begins an interruption in the common meaning of 'vastness' by creating a space between the word and its referent. The translated phrase "برونی ترین بودنم" is an image never being thought neither in the original text nor in Persian before. This is the translation of a text which creates a new unimaginable image. It should be noted that this phrase is repeated later in the text, and the same argument can be presented.

The 'I' in the following pages tries to express his/her different experiences before seeing the day and after. These experiences illustrate his/her new state of being when he/she sees the day. Among some of experiences he/she has when he/she sees the day is the one that he/she sees a scene which excites him/her to the point of delirium. Outdoors, he/she has a brief vision: A few steps away from him/her, just at the corner of the street he/she was about to leave, a woman with a baby carriage had stopped. She/he could not see her very well. She was maneuvering the carriage to get it through the outer door. At that moment, a man whom he/she had not seen approaching went in through that door. The man had already stepped across the sill when he moved backward and came out again. While the man stood next to the door, the baby carriage, passing in front of him, lifted slightly to cross the sill, and the young woman, after raising her head to look at him, also disappeared inside. He/she writes about his/her feeling of this experience: "I lingered in the joy and perfection of this happiness, for one moment my head as high as the stone of the sky and my feet on the pavement" (Blanchot, 1981, p. 10). The phrase 'the stone of the sky' in English implies that the sky is similar to a roof which is made of stone. The 'I' becomes so high that his/her head touches the sky. This is a simile. This phrase in Persian becomes "سنگ آسمان". The translated phrase literally means the stone which comes from the sky, which does not transfer the meaning. If the phrase is translated meaning based, it becomes "سقف آسمان". This meaning-based translated phrase transfers the meaning of the English phrase. But "سقف آسمان" has two meanings. First, it means the roof of the sky, which implies that the sky itself has a roof; second the sky is like a roof. The second meaning represents the meaning of the English phrase. But the first meaning makes the phrase remain loaded; it creates a new image in Persian which has not been thought before. When a Persian speaker reads the phrase, his/her language creates a new thought. The phrase remains ambiguous not because Persian is unable to transfer its meaning but the meaning becomes richer by translation. Indeed, the meaning of the phrase becomes richer both in English and Persian.

The 'I' at the end of the text is brought before the law to confess his/her story; that is, what he/she has seen in the day. Here, the day is the experience of his/her new life. In this new life, he/she has lived in a new and different being. To confess before the law, here, means reducing himself/herself to nothingness. For the law, his/her story is his entire life, which must be determined by the law. The 'I' never accepts this confession. He/she has seen the day in which has situated him/her between being and non-being. In the 'absolute awareness,' his/her 'innermost being' never is reduced into nothingness. The concepts 'the absolute awareness' and the 'innermost being' are created when the text is translated into Persian. As it was argued in the previous paragraphs, this is the act of translation which creates new notions in the text. The new notions change the text into a new text. In other words, the text begins to be built by translation. The text belongs to its afterlife. Here, it reminds us of what Benjamin calls the 'truth content'. The 'truth content' is the afterlife of the text; it is not interpretation which Benjamin calls the 'material content'. In Blanchot's view, the act of translation makes the originality effaced, and only the difference remains, a new work different from the other one.

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