Melancholic Performance and The Matter of Origins in Walter Benjamin's Translation Theory

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In this paper, I explore the relation between Walter Benjamin's theories of translation and melancholia, focusing specifically on the structure of repetition and a missed encounter with the lost origin. As far as any successful return to (lost) origins is concerned, melancholia teaches us that it is an impossibility, since what one returns to, what one repeats, can never be the same again. In this sense, one is destined to a missed encounter with an original text or an original relation in both melancholia and translation. Emerging through the withdrawal of the self, this notion of the missed encounter provokes a kind of impossible reading (here thought in terms of a translation) of the failure of representation and subjectivity. If, according to Jacques Derrida, translation is another word for the impossible, then a reading of the vicissitudes of melancholia might show how repetition structured in and as the missed encounter, itself propels the necessity of translation.

It is the task of the translator to release in his
own language that pure language which is under
the spell of another, to liberate the language
imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work.
For the sake of pure language, he breaks through
decayed barriers of his own language.

Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator"

I n this paper, I explore the relation between Walter Benjamin's theories of translation and melancholia, focusing specifically on the structure of repetition and the missed encounter. If translation, in its very essence, is nothing other than an attempt to return to and reproduce an original, then perhaps we should consider the viability of such a return. As far as any suc-

cessful return to (lost) origins is concerned, melancholia teaches us that it is an impossibility, since what one returns to, what one repeats, can never be the same again. In this sense, one is destined to a missed encounter with an original text or an original relation in both melancholia and translation. Emerging through the withdrawal of the self, this notion of the missed encounter provokes a kind of impossible reading (here thought in terms of a translation) of the failure of representation and subjectivity. If, according to Jacques Derrida, translation is another word for the impossible, then a reading of the vicissitudes of melancholia might show how repetition, structured in and as the missed encounter, itself propels the necessity of translation.

For Benjamin, translation is so much more than an act of communication or a smooth transfer of information. It is, he argues in his essay "The Task of the Translator," a way of discovering what a literary work says. In this manner, he is, indeed, interested in the issue of communication, but not in the way we initially suppose. "Is translation meant for readers who do not understand the original?" he asks (Benjamin 69). The answer, of course, is "yes," regardless of the theory of translation, but what does it mean to understand an original, what does one know when one reads a text? And how is this knowledge transferred in a translation - or a copy - of that text? Benjamin asks:

> What does a literary work "say"? What does it communicate? It "tells" very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information - hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations. (Benjamin "The Task" 69)

According to Benjamin, the significance and power of translation lies in its capacity to expose the literary dimension of a work; translation lays bare the very essence of language, which is something other than its communicative function. Consequently, Benjamin maintains, "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original" (69). This is not to say that the activity of transmitting is irrelevant to translation. Benjamin recognizes the necessity of this activity, but he sees it more as a means to another end: the evocation of what he calls "pure language" and the essential difference that persists in language.

In "The Task of the Translator," which was originally written as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens,* Benjamin grounds the emergence of pure language in the dynamic dimension of language. Translation, he argues, is the stage on which the vitality of language

presents itself, for translation exposes the inherent flux of language, especially as one attempts to move between two different languages: "Translation 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 special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (73). For Benjamin, the complexity of language inheres in the impossibility of ever returning adequately to the original text. The return one makes to the origin will always fall short in translation simply because translation initiates a change in the original text.

What emerges in translation, then, is difference itself, and this difference retroactively imposes itself on the original text, altering it and making it something other than what was copied in the first place. In this manner, one can never return to the beginning in translation, since the act annihilates the very object that it seeks to reproduce. This is what makes the task of the translator so daunting and is, perhaps, also why Benjamin named his essay *Die Aufgabe des übersetzers. "Aufgabe"* means both "task" or "duty" and "giving up" or "relinquishing." Inherent in the title, then, is this double meaning: while one's task or duty as translator is to return to the original and make a proper copy, one's duty is to relinquish this task, since such a return is unattainable. According to Paul de Man, "the translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original" (80). One cannot return to the original; translation is impossible because of the dynamic nature of language that, according to Benjamin, grounds both the difference and kinship between languages. "If the kinship of languages manifests itself in translations, this is not accomplished through a vague alikeness between adaptation and original," he writes, but "Rather, all suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the intention underlying each language as a whole - an intention, however, which no single language can attain by itself but which is realized only by the totality of their intentions supplementing each other: pure language" (Benjamin "The Task" 74).

Pure language, then, is that dimension of language that exists in no single language but rather resides in the relation between languages. It emerges most dramatically in translation as a figure or form, traced in the movement of a copy that exceeds its original. This is why, according to Benjamin, the act of translation gives access to the fundamental difference in language. "To regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux," Benjamin writes, "is the tremendous and only capacity of translation" (Benjamin "The Task" 80). Paradoxically enough, however, this ultimate potential of language relies on a strict literality, that is, the strongest fidelity to

the copy in the first instance. It is through the constraints of such fidelity that the freedom of language will present itself, not as a concrete or specific content, but rather as a figure or a movement of difference itself. One must not mistake the context for such fidelity, however. Benjamin is not referring to what we normally call "good" translations or translations that capture the spirit of the original language:

> it is not the highest praise of a translation, particularly in the age of its origin, to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language. Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. (Benjamin "The Task" 79, emphasis added)

The most "successful" translations allow the nucleus of pure language the freedom of its movement. Benjamin cites Holderlin's literal translations of Sophocles as exemplary in this regard: "Holderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language" (Benjamin "The Task" 81-82). Through an exercise of absolute fidelity in translation, Holderlin evokes the form of translation that takes one beyond signification. The reason that meaning plunges in Holderlin's translations, that one is threatened by the abyss of language, is precisely because they recreate the tragic on the level of the signifier rather than the signified. Because Holderlin embraces the form rather than the content of translation, he engages language on the level of its movement rather than its meaning.

This is precisely what Benjamin characterizes as the abyssal demand of translation. It is the making present of pure language, which is necessarily concealed and fragmentary. Through fidelity to the origin and the spirit of the literal copy, Holderlin exposes the radical freedom inherent in language, simply because he is not able to return to his point of origin. In a word, Holderlin's translations *fail*. Not because they did not turn out the way he had hoped, but rather because they miss the point of their origin - in this case, the ancient Greeks. Thus, they exceed the Greek form of tragedy, demonstrating in this excess the impossibility of ever attaining such an origin. In this realm, where pure language exposes the impossibility of its

own origin, insofar as it prevents itself from ever being one, language experiences itself as strange, foreign.

According to Benjamin, "all translation is only a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages" (Benjamin "The Task" 75). This is not a reference to the foreign nature of different national languages; it is not a reference to the lack of identity between languages, but rather refers to the inherent strangeness or alienation that inhabits every language. Language, that is, exposes its unconscious element and, Barbara Johnson argues, "can only exist in the space of its own foreignness to itself" (146). In his reading of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," Paul de Man evokes this same alienation inherent in language, but he ties it to a sort of suffering, a great longing not unlike the melancholic's:

> What translation does, by reference to the fiction or hypothesis of a pure language devoid of the burden of meaning, is that it implies - in bringing to light what Benjamin calls "*die Wehen des eigenen*" - the suffering of what one thinks of as one's own - the suffering of the original language. We think we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think that we are not alienated. What the translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language, that the original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering. (84)

This alienation, this strangeness, insofar as it exposes us to a particular suffering - that is, to a melancholic longing for a lost origin - throws the translator back to the beginning and to the fidelity of literalness to begin again his / her pursuit of linguistic complementation.

This longing for origins also takes our analysis back to another beginning and another gesture of fidelity: that is, to Benjamin's return to language in his essay entitled "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man," and to his excessive copy that is the *Trauerspiel*.[1] Perhaps, then, it is no accident that this latter text concerns itself with the subject of melancholia.

Benjamin's best-known work on melancholia, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* begins in a way that, one might say, functions to suspend its beginning. And this suspension is, in a manner of speaking, double. In a

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1. I am referring here to Benjamin's famous book on the German Mourning Play, entitled *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 1977). Hereafter referred to as the Trauerspiel from the German title *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels.*

sense, Benjamin offers two modes of deferral, both of which point ultimately to the task of thinking translation, not as an object of knowledge, but rather as something beyond the signified. For Benjamin, the act of translation marks itself in what one might provisionally call a loss of origin, or, more specifically, in the movement of a text in which its origin finds itself elsewhere, somewhere beyond or at the limits of the text.

The first of these deferrals presents itself in the place of the introduction, the now famous "Epistemo - Critical Prologue." Given the intent of Benjamin's seemingly straightforward undertaking - to write a kind of literary history of the Baroque mourning play - this introduction frustrates this task insofar as it elides the problem of historical explication, turning, instead, to the question of language and the possibility of what Christopher Fynsk calls a "philosophically founded criticism." According to Fynsk, the relation between the prologue and the piece of historical criticism that it introduces opens up a kind of "methodological statement and cannot be avoided in any serious reading of the volume" (190). It is precisely in this relation, both figured in the deferral of the actual historical project itself and in Benjamin's attempt to read one mode of discourse into another, thus exposing the limits of either discourse, that Benjamin's theory of translation performs itself.

The second deferral, or suspension of the beginning, appears in the dedication to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. On this dedication page, Benjamin cryptically writes "Conceived 1916, Written 1925." Here Benjamin effectively places the origin (*Ursprung*) of the work elsewhere, thus frustrating the reader's attempt to, as it were, start from the beginning. Instead, the reader is referred back to another essay written in 1916, the aforementioned language essay entitled "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man." In this earlier essay, Benjamin first takes up the relation between language, translation, and melancholia. Reading this earlier essay, according to Fynsk, "will be a matter of assessing Benjamin's historical instantiation of the formal relation [. . .] between a language of names and the fallen, human language of signification" (Fynsk 190). One certainly could argue that in his major work on melancholia, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin makes this return to the language essay of 1916, since it was the first formulation of his theory of melancholia in language. Benjamin himself underlines this relation in a letter to Gerhard Scholem as he calls the preface "nothing more and nothing less than the prolegomena to an epistemology, thus a kind of second, I'm not sure better, stage of the early language essay" (qtd. in Jennings 198).

This remark is much more telling, though, especially in relation to his theory of both translation and melancholia, for it indicates a failure in the

return to the origin. The second stage - the reproduction - is not clearly any better in Benjamin's mind; there is no marked improvement, no progression in the thought. This suspension also throws reader and writer alike into a past that doesn't sustain the present in any productive way. This is not a meaningless failure, however, for it offers a profoundly subtle performance of the very theory of melancholia that Benjamin is pursuing in his study. Since the intrusion of a stagnant past is the hallmark of the melancholic's experience, it is important to see how and why this very invasion into the text - not to mention the beginning of the text - signifies something more than a simple deferral. Like the melancholic, who can never begin but rather is always living in the past, Benjamin does not properly "begin" his *Trauerspiel* study. Instead, and in place of an introduction, epigraph, or a beginning, he looks to the past, to an earlier, presumably, "incomplete" essay. Like the translator, he suffers a *"great longing* for linguistic complementation" (Benjamin "The Task" 79). With this deferral, Benjamin doesn't return to complete the task he set out with in the original, though, or to perfect its argument. Instead, he returns in order to indulge in some disappointment or to relinquish some duty. Like the melancholic, then, he is stuck in the past. Between the "present" of the *Trauerspiel* study and the "past" of the language essay, between the original and its copy, lies some sort of inertia, some kind of failure or disappointment. One could call it a shortcoming.

With this gesture toward the earlier language essay, Benjamin does much more than posit the origin of the *Trauerspiel* study elsewhere. Instead, in a brilliant move of assimilation, an act of profound fidelity, Benjamin literally copies a passage from "On Language as Such" into the heart of the text on the *Trauerspiel*. In copying this fragment, Benjamin, in a manner of speaking, performs precisely that movement *between* two discourses that exposes the limits of either discourse as he offers, in the second passage, a kind of copy which exceeds its original. This sort of repetition, according to Benjamin's own theory of translation, is the translator's act *par excellence*. While this excessive gesture itself points to the limits of the relation between the two passages, it also enacts, in its mimetic return, a frustrated relation to any possibility of an origin, as the site of origin becomes lost, as its possibility emerges only in and through its utter impossibility: at the limits or in the excess of the copy. Let us examine these two texts in order to determine, quite literally, the nature of their differences. The first fragment from "On Language as Such" reads:

> Because she is mute, nature mourns. Yet the inversion of this proposition leads even further into the essence of nature; the sadness

> of nature makes her mute. In all mourning there is the deepest inclination to speechlessness, which is infinitely more than inability or disinclination to communicate. That which mourns feels itself thoroughly known by the unknowable. To be named — even when the namer is Godlike and blissful — perhaps always remains an intimation of mourning. But how much more melancholy to be named not from the one blessed, paradisiac language of names, but from the hundred languages of man. (329-330)

The second, from *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* reads:

> Because it is mute, fallen nature mourns. But the converse of this statement leads even deeper into the essence of nature: its mournfulness makes it become mute. In all mourning there is a tendency to silence, and this infinitely more than inability or reluctance to communicate. The mournful has the feeling that it is known comprehensively by the unknowable. To be named - even if the name - giver is god-like and saintly - perhaps always brings with it a presentiment of mourning. But how much more so not to be named, only to be read, to be read uncertainly by the allegorist, and to have become highly significant thanks only to him. (224-225)

Because the act of translation always yields some difference between the original text and the copy, it would seem that the differences that inhere in this particular translation of the language essay into the *Trauerspiel* study might show us something of the performative dimension of translation that Benjamin can only demonstrate, but can never explicate in his theory.[2]

It would seem, then, that Benjamin's theory of translation never comes to its full realization until the completion of the *Trauerspiel* study and his performative return to the original language essay. In the excess of this return, one sees the abyss of pure language - which is the central concern (and most abstract notion) of his translation essay - take shape. Only in the movement of the differences between the two copies does the impossible pure language emerge, however. By looking more closely at the relation between the *Trauerspiel* and the language essay, then, we might see something fundamental concerning Benjamin's translation theory. And since Benjamin's translation theory posits that "no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original," it may, in

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2. In "The Task of The Translator" Benjamin writes, "this foreignness [that characterizes pure language] remains out of the reach of mankind; at any rate, it eludes any direct attempt," 75.

fact, be more fruitful to consider the *non-relation* between these two texts.

Thus, we should attend to what Benjamin misses as he copies or translates his earlier work on language into his later theory of melancholia. Between the two passages, the original and the copy, the essential difference lies in the close of each passage, where, in the second, Benjamin reveals the function of the allegorist and his act of reading in the place of the fallen hundred languages of man. While this difference at first glance might seem insignificant, it is precisely here, in the movement between the two orders of language that Benjamin outlines in "On Language as Such," that something of the melancholy fascination of nature is revealed. In presenting an image of nature that is thoroughly known by the unknowable, Benjamin offers a compelling vision of the melancholy subject. For it is precisely this notion of an absolute or totalized relation - the being *thoroughly* known - that the melancholy subject realizes, though this realization comes about only through a missed encounter - an encounter, that is, which exceeds our subjective grasp. By making the agent of knowledge the unknowable, Benjamin suggests a similar scenario. The formal relation between knowledge and the unknowable, such as it is presented here, necessarily encompasses a non-correspondence of terms. It is because of this incommensurability that the miss occurs; the same miss which Benjamin performs as he attempts to return to the "original" site.

Another important difference, or miss, between the copied fragments lies in the inclusion of one, seemingly insignificant, modifier: the "fallen" character of nature emerges in the second passage, adding an extra piece or kernel to the first. And it is precisely in the insistence of this extra kernel that something beyond signification is exposed. In the excess of this exposure, Benjamin's concern with language lies in the relation between a language of names and the fallen, human language of signification. In the 1916 essay, "On Language as Such," Benjamin characterizes naming as a language that knows no object:

> Naming, in the realm of language, has as its sole purpose and its incomparably high meaning that it is the innermost nature of language itself. Naming is that by which nothing beyond is communicated, and in which language itself communicates itself absolutely. In naming the mental entity that communicates itself is *language*. Where mental being in its communication is language itself in its absolute wholeness, only there is the name, and only the name is there. Name as the heritage of human language therefore vouches for the fact *that language as such* is the mental being of man; and

> only for this reason is the mental being of man, alone among all
> mental entities, communicable without residue. On this is founded
> the difference between human language and the language of things.
> (318)

So the significance of this intrusion of the "fallen," as well as the significance
of Benjamin's presentation of these two passages, will somehow circle around
the relation of human language to the language of things: between the notion
of language as an absolute relation to itself (without residue) and the presence
of a language of communication. And it is through this language of com-
munication, one might argue, that something beyond - yet intimately engaged
with - language is presented; something beyond, that is, which itself offers the
possibility of thinking the absolute character of language and translation.

This is not to simply say that it is only through the language of com-
munication, through a fallen language, that the language of absolutes might
be known. For in this relation, which for Benjamin occupies the center of
linguistic theory, the impossibility and absoluteness of language presents
itself. It is not, that is, a matter of beginning with what we already have -
our language of communication - and pressing it to its very limits in order
to transcend those limits and move into the realm of the absolute. (Though
this is at least half of the scenario.) Rather, it is more a matter of a metaleptic
relation between the two, a relation where the effect functions retroactively
as cause. Such a relation, of course, dismantles the straightforward logic of
cause and effect, where cause signals the origin of its effects, positing,
instead, a relation that works at the level of a formal paradox. According to
Benjamin:

> the mental entity that communicates itself in language is not lan-
> guage itself but something to be distinguished from it. The view that
> the mental essence of a thing consists precisely in its language - this
> view, taken as a hypothesis, is the great abyss into which all
> linguistic theory threatens to fall, and to survive suspended precisely
> over this abyss is its task. The distinction between a mental entity
> and the linguistic entity in which it communicates [. . .] constitutes
> a deep and incomprehensible paradox. [. . .] Nevertheless, this
> paradox has a place, as a solution, at the center of linguistic theory,
> but remains a paradox, and insoluble, if placed at the beginning.
> ("On Language as Such" 315)

Making a distinction between communication and language itself opens a
paradox, for neither can be thought without the other, yet, at the same time,
both must be thought in the context of their difference. In this sense, then, one

should begin the difficult task of thinking how each of these entities, in its relation to the other, emerges as different to itself. In its non-correspondence with the other, that is, something of each entity that is more than itself offers the possibility of thinking difference in itself.

One opens oneself to the figure of this paradox through a thought of a lost origin. Turning toward this impossible origin certainly does not impose a return to some sort of beginning or linear thinking. For this is precisely what Benjamin warns against in his translation theory. To posit one entity (or language) as originary and the other as mediated by that origin simply reinscribes a non-paradoxical idea of difference, where difference is thought in terms of a simple relation between entities rather than within them. For it is in the logic of the lost (or impossible) origin that something of the "more than itself" is structurally exposed. And this form of relation is precisely what Benjamin is working through in his translation theory, especially as he performs this theory in the mimetic return he makes to his original language text (1916) in the *Trauerspiel* study (1925).

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