從漫遊者到翻譯者:班雅明的彌賽亞時間與 翻譯思維

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摘要

本篇文章主要以班雅明對在城市大街上無所事事,卻以獨具的洞察力觀照四周 事物的「漫遊者」的見解、另類的「彌賽亞時間觀」以及對「翻譯者」的觀點來探 討不同語言相互間翻譯的議題。班雅明在談翻譯這個議題時,似乎將「漫遊者」的 角色類比爲一位「翻譯者」的職責。爲何「翻譯者」的角色會和「漫遊者」扯上關 聯?他們之間有何相似之處?時間的歷史性要如何與擺盪在可翻譯性與不可翻譯性 之間的語言產生連結?這些問題都會在本文章中論及與探討。

關鍵字:班雅明、漫遊者、彌賽亞時間、翻譯、翻譯者

From Flâneur to Translator: Walter Benjamin's Thought of Messianic Time and of Translation

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the issue of translation (from source language to target language) through Benjamin's thought of flâneur, a wandering city stroller with momentary but insightful vision, and of messianic time, a new conception of historical time. Benjamin seemingly analogizes the role of flâneur to that of translator. In what sense can we say that the task of translator is like that of flâneur? Does both of them have something in common? How is a new concept of historical time correlated with the ambiguity of language oscillating between translatability and non-translatability? These issues will be covered and explored in this paper.

Key words: Walter Benjamin, flâneur, Messianic time, translation, translator

In "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin exhibits a new historical understanding, a Kabbalah and Jewish messianic perspective of now-time (Jetztzeit), in his observation of translation study and of the task of a genuine translator. Paul de Man, in his discussion of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," regards Benjamin's "illumination" of translative process as "a historical event" (104). To Benjamin, the process of understanding translation resembles that of understanding history. Benjamin understanding of history is guite different from Hegelian dialectic conception (aufheben) of progressive and continuous time; instead, he highlights a now-time that disrupts the continuity of a progressive history and tradition. To him, a genuine translator never transmits the temporary "information" of the text between source language and target language because "[t]he value of information does not survive the moment [. . .] [i]t lives only at that moment" (Storyteller 90).¹ He must resemble a storyteller whose "story" reveals the essence of life and is capable of passing from generation to generation. Viewed in this perspective, a good translator, like a good storyteller, can catch the essence of language and can endow the original text with an after-life that releases the maximum of linguistic meaning. However, this essence of language, or what Benjamin calls "pure language," manifests an ambiguity of language because it indicates an intermediated state of language and a liminality between translatability and non-translatability.

Like the title "The Task of the Translator" suggests, Benjamin's main concern of this article does not lie in translation but in translator, a translating subject. In a process of translating, a translating subject may enter into a messianic historical horizon in which he can catch an essence of language. Like a flâneur, who may glimpse the essence of things with a "contemplative gaze,"² a good translator also attempt to expand the meaning of an original text to its maximum meaning with a "gaze" into pure language. The pure language, to Benjamin, functions as a fundamental "kinship" of all languages. It is an essence of language that enables all languages to correlate with one another before the fall of Tower of Babel. This pure language is smashed and spread by a "breaking of the vessels" into fragments hidden in all languages. The translator should glue the fragments together and make his translation "incorporate the origi-

¹ Many Walter Benjamin's concepts are quoted in my paper, including "The Storyteller," "The Flâneur," "The Task of Translator" (abbreviated as *TT*), "Theses on the Philosophy of History" (abbreviated as *TOPH*), and "Critique of Violence" (abbreviated as *CV*).

² This "contemplative" gaze does not associate an ordinary vision, but an empathy-like vision that probes into the essence of things. See Benjamin's discussion of flâneur in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1992. pp. 35-41.

nal mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are parts of a vessel" (*TT* 78). This greater language signals the fundamental pure language. A genuine translator must trace the pure language back to every original text, but the text he translates is not necessary and is impossible to present an equivalent translation between two languages because of linguistic and cultural differences.

In this regard, finding an equivalence of original text is not a translator's primary concern; rather, a translator should see through the surface of the original text and quest for not sentence but literalness of the pure language by seeking deeper essence of the original text with a view to pursuing all possible meanings. To this, Benjamin states:

> A real translation is transparent; it does not block its light, but allows the pure language [...] 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. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (*TT* 79)

If sentences constitute an organized totality, then words (literalness) resemble unorganized fragments that allow pure language to hide within them. In other words, the pure language, instead of being hidden within organized sentences, is harbored in the fragments of words. Put it another way, sentences function as a wall that shuts the pure language from them, while words serve as an arcade passage that is open to the lingering of pure language.³ A translator, according to Benjamin, should seek out the "arcade" of pure language hidden within the fragments of the translation of original text. In this sense, a translator/translating subject is like a flâneur/wandering subject because both of them stroll into an arcade. A flâneur may enter into covered arcade passageways, an ambiguous space between public sphere and private sphere. Likewise, a translator may march into a literal arcade site, an obscure space between translability and non-translability.

As Benjamin puts it, "[f]idelity and freedom in translation have traditionally been regarded as conflicting tendencies" (*TT* 79). Namely, translation must encom-

³ Benjamin's "arcade" refers to covered passageways of shopping streets that constitute a hybrid and ambiguous space where can be considered as a public sphere open to and a private sphere claimed by an aimless and lingering street wanderer (a flâneur). See also Benjamin's discussion of flâneur in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*. London: Verso, 1992. pp. 35-41.

pass a conflict and display an oscillation between two elements. One is totally translatable fidelity of the original text that conforms to the hegemonic standard of translation; the other is totally untranslatable fragments that are free from the constraint of that standard. More precisely, the former is only in "the finite product of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves" (ibid). The latter actually presents a pure language which conveys a permanent disjunction inhibiting in all languages. To Benjamin, this permanent disjunction of pure language is not totally alienated from the hegemonic tradition and nor is it totally separated from a horizon of historical understanding because it is recognized as a pure basic form without an intentional end. Benjamin's translating subject should know that a messianic restoration will bring all fragments of pure language back to its divine harmony, an amphora-like totality, and reach a messianic redemption. The pure language is by no means a totally independent entity. If the great tradition of language system can be compared to a circle, then the pure language affiliates a tangent which "touches a circle slightly and but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity" (TT 80). The translator's interpretation is not entirely outside this circle, the great tradition, because he still slightly touches the brimming point on the circle of tradition, but he bases on this point to expand the meaning of its interpretation to infinity, an after-life of an original text. The translator seems to be involved in a "liminal" state, an intermediate state between fidelity and freedom when he practices his translator's task. In this sense, he may present both the feature of translatable "fidelity" and non-translatable "freedom" in his translative text.

Benjamin argues that the task of genuine translator remains "elusive" (TT 75) because of the in-between-ness nature of his translation text. A genuine translator, to Benjamin, is obligated to deal with the essence of language, the pure language. Yet, the pure language in translation text signifies something virginal, intact and untouchable in translation but it links all languages together. To use Andrew Benjamin's words: "The 'pure language' then is not a language. It is language. It marks the sameness of language while allowing for their difference" (103). Thus, Benjamin's translator's translation has nothing to do with being translatable or being non-translatable; instead, it is embedded in a "liminal" state of being both translatable and non-translatable. That is, the translation, seen in Derrida's light, can be compared to "a promise of consummation, but a promise never

reached."⁴ Derrida uses a sexual comparison of hymenal in-between-ness, rather than simple bipolarity of fragments а (non-translatability) and totality (translatability), to elaborate the nature of translation. If the hymen symbolizes "fidelity" of translation text to an original text, then the hymen becomes a perpetual promise of consummation, but the promise can never be achieved because the reaching of hymen simultaneously announces the end of fidelity. This keeps the translation always swaying in an intermediated state between translatability and non-translatability.

A subject's involving in a "liminal" and intermediated state seems to become a repetitive motif in Benjamin's thought. In discussing the nineteenth century's Parisien flâneur, he also points out that the flâneur entangles himself in a liminal state between his individual freedom to "[catch] things in flight" (Flâneur 41) and his conforming to the capitalism of the commercial market when he is wandering into an arcade marketplace. Benjamin's translating subject (the translator) can find out the essence of pure language in a particular moment that is cut off from a process of historical temporality. Similarly, the flâneur resembles a translator who does not totally alienate himself from a basic form of traditional historical understanding, but who can "reprieve from [historical] time" (Bauman 140) temporarily to catch the essence of life, the things in flight. The flâneur is far from Poe's "man of the crowd"⁵ who is buried in the tide of crowd without any individuality. He rather "[demands] elbow room and [is] willing to forego the life of a gentleman leisure" (*Flâneur* 54). This "elbow room" is quite similar to translator's "freedom" in interpreting his translation.

However, Benjamin suggests that flâneur's "elbow room" and translator's "freedom" are in a temporary and contingent occasion, owing to that the essence of life, or language, can be glimpsed or caught in a fleeting moment. Benjamin uses a metaphor in order to illuminate this particular moment—"it is a tiger's leap into the past" (TOPH 261). The tiger resembles the flâneur and the translator. If the whole human history can be compared to a ground, the tiger's jumping from the ground may demonstrate its temporary isolation from a historical temporality. However, the tiger cannot cut off its relation from the history, the basic form of teleology, because its temporary suspension on the air still bears the burden of past that is connected to the human historical temporality. This particular

⁴ See Derrida's "Des Tour de Babel" in *Difference in Translation*. Ed. Joseph F. Graham, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985, p.175.

⁵ See Benjamin's discussion of Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism.* London: Verso, 1992. pp. 50-5.

messianic moment at which the flâneur and the translator involve does not equalize a totally chaotic moment. It is a time when an intermediated state takes place between forming and non-forming; a pre-forming situation burdening with past history, the fundamental pure form. Benjamin's flâneur and translator are capable of entering into this temporary suspension to discern the essence of life and of language. But both of them are aware that they cannot withdraw themselves from past history, just like the tiger which finally returns back to the ground after its temporary leaping.

To translator, a universal standard of translation serves as a historical tradition that places the translating subject into a hermeneutic process and endows him/her with historical consciousness. Henceforth, the translator's text, in terms of Gadamer, "is always partly determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter and hence by the totality of the objective course of history" (Gadamer 55). Benjamin's flâneur and translator do not totally conform to the course of history. They still enjoy a temporary reprieve from normalized historical time. But after the temporary reprieve, they have to know that they should go back to the normalizing course of history. In fact, the flâneur does not intend to constantly wander in a big city street; he still knows that the arcade market is his destination, where the commodity and market function like a normalizing power that summons him into a place of capitalistic hegemony. Consequently, the flâneur. through the seduction of commodity, is subjected to the hegemony of capitalism and is transformed into a consumer (Bauman 146). Yet, he is not merely a passive figure because he is still aware that he can pursue his own "elbow room" of individual freedom by actively knowing that he is being looked at or appreciated. Viewed in this perspective, both flâneur and translator are oscillating between hegemony and individual freedom. The flâneur can actively pursues the "elbow" room" and catches the essence of life in a society manipulated by hegemonic capitalism; whereas, the translator seeks out an essence of language, the pure language, which is hidden in a universal standard of language system. Therefore, Benjamin's "task" of flâneur is helpful in understanding the task of translator. More important, both flâneur and translator may leap from a traditional historical temporality to enter into a now-time (perpetual presentness) that temporarily destructs the progressive and continuous historicizing process. Benjamin, indeed, appropriates his outdoor flâneur into an indoor translator and both of them share a similar task: they are capable of catching essence in flight at that particular moment, a messianic time. Benjamin's application of

messianic time, the now-time, to the translation study opens a new path to see the traditional historical temporality. This now-time straddles between a rigid historical temporality and an intermediated temporary suspension. Faced with this temporary suspension in a particular messianic moment, the translator may see through the surface of his/her translation text and find out the essence of language that expands an after-life of the original text.

As mentioned earlier, Paul de Man, in discussing Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," argues that the fragments of pure language remain "essential fragmentary" (De Man 91) and is without harmonious unity of "a breaking vessel."

> The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment—so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly—and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one. (ibid)

Quite different from Benjamin, who concludes that all translations of the original text are fragment parts of a vessel, de Man assumes that translation "disarticulates" the original text because "the original is already dead" (85). He denies a fundamental unity of all languages in regarding Benjamin's pure language as fragments of a breaking vessel which can never restore its original wholeness. For de Man, the fragments of language are metonymic combined without reaching a totalizing whole. So, to him, Benjamin's pure language, the fundamental unity of all languages, is nothing but an "errancy of language," "a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages" (92). Moreover, de Man connects the study of translation with that of history, so it is not difficult to realize that his concept of "permanent disjunction" of translation fragments is analogically found in his concept of history. He appears to view Benjamin's messianic time as a nihilistic moment and assert that his "concept of history is nihilistic" (103). In this sense, de Man's seems to highlight the nihilistic nature of language and of history.

The concept of messianic time, according to Benjamin, can serve as an unassimilated and fleeting critical awareness in a hegemonic historical progress. The messianic time is contrary to the hegemonic historical temporality, which is produced by a homogenizing, fixed, and empty time. But Benjamin has also noticed that this critical awareness cannot be totally cut off its "parasite" relation from the hegemonic historical conception as well as that it has to be based on the "form" of a dominating concept in criticizing the same dominating concept. To this, Benjamin observes:

> The concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the concept of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time. A critique of the concept of such a progression must be the basis of any criticism of the concept of progress itself. (*TOPH* 261)

If "nihilism" signals a process of negating all existing system and institution, de Man misunderstands the significance of Benjamin's critical function of messianic time, because Benjamin never cuts the momentary and messianic critical awareness from its link to the basis of a dominating historical conception. This critical position highlights the situation of flâneur and that of translator. Though flâneur enjoys a temporary "elbow room" in his aimless wandering around the big city and in seeing through essence of life in a temporary messianic moment, he still cannot get away from the domination of capitalism; nor can he negate his identity as a consumer while strolling into an arcade marketplace. In a similar vein, Benjamin's translator may also dig out the essence of language, the pure language,

from the translation of original text and henceforth he is able to broaden the maximum of the language meaning. But the pure language is not what de Man calls a sort of permanent disjunction; rather, it still connotes a fundamental form, which bears the burden of historical and traditional form, in language production. Thus, both flâneur and translator cannot totally isolate its subjectivity from involving in a dominating historical conception. The flâneur cannot shun from the hegemony of capitalism. While, the translator cannot reject the traditional form of language structure when he is translating a text; or his translation can be hardly readable.

The hegemony and the universal standard strongly suggest an enforcement of power relation. The powerful enforcement of a center, in accordance with deconstruction approach, is not always a negative term, for the center endows everything with its *raison d'etre* and constitutes the significance of its existence. As a consequence, Benjamin's concept of messianic history and of translation echo more to Derrida's notion of "play of the structure"⁶ rather than de Man's "nihilistic moment," because both Derrida and Benjamin do not disavow the necessity of a center or a universal historical consciousness in criticizing the

⁶ See Derrida's "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Science" in *Writing and Difference*. London: Routledge, 1978.pp. 278-9.

metaphysical human history. Derrida's deconstruction approach never connotes a nihilist perspective toward the human history. Contrarily, it demonstrates a "center" in "an organizing principle of a structure" (Derrida 278-9). The nature of a forming center in this "play of the structure" lies in an unstable and contingent process of center-shifting that is free from power relation. Put it another way, the center can be substituted by other centers at any time because no center can exist permanently. This contingent and constant displacement of a center in a "free-play" structure exemplifies a pure form, or a mode, of the human historical discourse and constant-shifting of the content, due to that the center cannot persist permanently. Moreover, within the mode of this free-play structure, the power relation becomes a perpetual intermediated and pre-forming state. If power (dominating/dominated, or master/slave) relation is the end of the power struggle among multiple centers, then there is no end in this free-play mode of structure, because only when the center is ceaselessly shifting can the play free from power relation. Derrida's concept of "free-play" mode is very close to Benjamin's concept of "pure means,"⁷ which always falls into a mode of intention

⁷ See Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence" in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings.* Tran. Edmund Jephcott. New York: Schocken Books, 1986. pp. 290-1. but never reach an end. This pure means also associates the pure "mode of intention" (TT 74), the "pure form." Maybe Benjamin's concept of "pure means (form)" can help understand the concept of pure language in his discussion of translation. Benjamin states:

> Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. (*TT* 72)

This embryonic or intensive form, according to Benjamin, refers to the pure language, the mode of intention for all languages. Like Derrida's "free-play," Benjamin's pure language serves as a pure form in which every possible and various language arrangement may take place within the fundamental basis of pure language. Thus, with the pure language as a fundamental unity, all languages arrangements only function as a pure intentional means and never reach an end of violence.⁸

To Benjamin, hegemony and universal

⁸ See also Benjamin's "Critique of Violence." Benjamin argues that the end always implies violence and that only through "pure means without end" can free everything from violence.

standard in a process of historical progression can signify the end of violence. Facing a history manipulated by hegemony of historical consciousness, Benjamin knows only through a messianic time can the hegemony be disrupted and can the messianic moment enact a possible means to render a new historical consciousness. This messianic time can free all historical consciousness from hegemonic violence-the power relation-because the essence of things lies in a pure form that contains pure means without an intentional end. This is the reason why Benjamin tells us in "The Task of the Translator" that "[n]o poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener" (TT 69). Benjamin applies the concept of messianic time to his perspective of history and thought of translation. Andrew Benjamin, in his comment on Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator." noted that "[w]ork of art-object of interpretation-for Benjamin, are not "intended" for their recipient" (87). Andrew Benjamin, viewing in Benjamin's light, maintains that the essence of things, including works of art and object of interpretation (translation), can be regarded as a basic pure form that conforms to the mode of intention of a hegemonic historical consciousness but remains with freedom of changing its various content.

The pure language must maintain its

pure form and is never with an intentional end. The pure form, the mode of intention, is hidden within the essence of things and may enable the human history to undergo a new change. Likewise, the pure language, the basic form of linguistic structure, is also buried in all human languages and can be rendered to produce an infinite after-life of the language by translator's discerning "gaze." A genuine translator, besides expressing the reciprocal relationship between languages, must "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" (TT 80). The word "re-creation" points out the main concern of Benjamin's thought of language and of translation. Benjamin, unlike Paul de Man who denies a fundamental unity of language, does not negate a basic form of all languages. Actually, he emphasizes that the translator should use the fundamental unity of languages to create "again" new arrangement of linguistic possibility.

A translator, in Benjamin's viewpoint, should be aware that a faithful equivalent translation of the original text may encumber the expansion of linguistic meaning. For this reason, the translator must sense a necessary anxiety of the influence caused by a universal or a hegemonic standard of language and then attempts to free himself

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from the manipulation of the hegemony by renewing a linguistic form of his translation text. But he suggests that this renewal linguistic form of translation can never persist with a hegemonic and fixed form, because it will be substituted by another new linguistic mode of translation in a contingent occasion, a messianic moment. At that particular moment, a translator, with a capability that resembles a flâneur's, can see through the essence of language and can base on a fundamental form to re-create and to expand the after-life of language.

Benjamin's notion of the after-life of language is no more theoretical. Now, the renewal and recreated translation texts are made possible by the confrontation and interaction between the global and hegemonic language (currently it seems to be English) and the "Other" language used by other people around the world. These translation texts among these languages can illustrate the after-life of language. To take English as an example, the circulation of English all over the world results in the English translation of other languages, or English transformation caused by non-English speaker's "misuse." The interaction of English and other languages consists of two co-existing elements; on the one hand, the reader must find the homogenizing element that eradicates the linguistic and cultural differences found in "Other" language and produces assimilated equivalence between English and its "Other" language. On the other hand, the reader may also conceive that English also undergoes changes, which are illustrated in Pidgin English, Indian English, and Afro-American English...when it is spreading to other ethnicity. The variety and modification of English is a result from some heterogeneous linguistic and cultural differences among different ethnicity, or what Bhabha calls the *interstitial*.⁹

The "interstitial" provides the path to the messianic time that temporarily disrupts the continuity and stability of hegemonic English. As discussed earlier, this messianic temporality by no means indicates a nihilistic moment but manifests a pure form without an intentional end. Hence, the untranslatable "interstitial" elements and English transformations remain translatable in an English form but still reveal their differences from formal English. These English transformations enrich and create modification of English language. If English continues to interact with other languages and arouses more English translation (or transformation) into these other (Other) languages, we can expect more various forms of English. In Benjamin's sense, the interac-

⁹ See Homi K. Bhabha's "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trial of Cultural Translation" in *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994. pp. 227-8

tion between source language and target language indeed extends the after-life of the linguistic meaning.

Like the outdoor flâneur, who wanders in a big city and marches toward an arcade place where the boundary between a public sphere and a private sphere becomes blurred and obscure, the indoor translator, dabbling in a study of language, also reaches a space where this translating subject oscillates between the translatable fidelity and untranslatable freedom. The flâneur is able to catch the essence of things through a contemplative gaze at a particular moment that breaks from a traditional historical temporality, while the translator may discern that the fragments of translation text can lead to a messianic restoration to pure language, the essence of language and the pure mode of intention, which recreates more various language arrangements. The translator's task, according to Benjamin, does not aim to overthrow, or to make nihilistic the traditional and historical formation of language but to dig out the pure language. More clearly, it is the translation among various languages that renders the emergence of pure language, the pure form of language. It manifests the sameness of all languages, while allows simultaneously the co-existence of their difference. A genuine translator's translation must parasite within the hegemonic standard of a linguistic form,

but the translator should simultaneously base on the pure form, the free-play structure, of this standard to demonstrate more different possibility of language. In doing so, a genuine translator's task is accomplished.

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