

Response Paper to Atsuko Tsuji's 'The Event, Writing and the Self: Walter Benjamin's Language Theory'

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Atsuko Tsuji's paper is very interesting and invites a number of issues for discussion. What I find more intriguing is the connection between Benjamin's arcane philosophy of language and his fascinating discussions on experience where Tsuji locates a hope for escaping an efficiency-oriented education that aims to create an ill-defined autonomous subject (Tsuji, 2010).

I agree with Tsuji that aspiring to create autonomous subjects could prove to be a risky task. This is because autonomy, as understood by a certain strand of critical pedagogy, sees fit to provide the students 'a supposedly absolute, disinterested and infallible knowledge of objects (or the self) unmediated by any kind of intrusive otherness' (Papastephanou, 2004, p. 372). Papastephanou (2004) describes the person who emerges from such an education with allusion to the myth of Narcissus, a young man who disdains those who love him and for this reason he is condemned by the gods to fall in love with himself. Facing his reflection in the river water he only sees, loves and reaffirms himself. Likewise the autonomous subject are in danger of seeing only themselves¹.

Tsuji claims that we should aim for transformation and the inclusion of the non-I in the learning process and she supports that we should look for such instances while we examine what happens in learning through our writings. So my questions are: How can our writing, which is a solitary practice, inform us about something that happens and is not perceivable by us in the first place? Why should we turn to our personal writing in order to be informed about something that we as subjects cannot account for? Isn't it exactly here, in the face of this blind alley that we need to turn to the other in order to benefit from the experience of a colleague or the contemplation of a theorist? In order to answer these questions, I have to pursue three connections that are important for such an investigation. These are the connections between: chance-event and experience, language and similarity and finally chance-event and writing. I will address these connections separately in order to answer the questions I have set.

CHANCE-EVENT AND EXPERIENCE

Benjamin believed that he was living in an age that forgot what experience is.² Some of his questions, that are very relevant to education, are the following: 'Where has it all gone (experience)? Who still meets people who really know how to tell a story? ... And who will attempt to deal with young people by giving them the benefit of experience?' (1933a/2004, p. 731).

Benjamin's thought was not of the lamenting type. In the 1929 essay '*The Return of the Flâneur*' he investigates the experience of the person who walks around the

city. In this wondering around the flâneur might be looking for whatever inhabits a place and that could be people, animals, images or even spirits (Benjamin, 2004). Through these chance-encounters the flâneur experiences the city. However, any chance-event cannot result into transformation and learning. Benjamin distinguished between *studying* the city and *learning*. He says that

a whole world separates these words. Anyone can study, but learning is something you can only do if you are there for the duration. There is a kind of experience that craves for the unique, the sensational, and another kind that seeks out eternal sameness (p. 265- 266).

Benjamin's first type of experience (*Erlebnis*) is 'a single, noteworthy experience', whereas the second type (*Erfahrung*) is the kind of a permanent transformation 'in the sense of learning from life over an extended period'³. Learning, however, should not be always a matter of direct experience. In the 1939 essay '*On Some Motifs of Baudelaire*' Benjamin engages with different texts in order to give an account for the experience of the city. According to John Phillips:⁴

By critically engaging with texts of philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature, Benjamin develops an analysis of urban experience that would have eluded any attempt to grasp it directly via the intellect. His analysis is based on what he calls the method of historical materialism. The assumption here is not simply that the written text records or is impressed by experiences (and thus functions as a kind of memory) beyond or even against the conscious intention of its authors. Rather Benjamin acknowledges an historical privilege to particular works, for their ability to register the shocks or anxieties of their times.

Consequently, it is important to underline that any kind of experience can not result in learning and transformation. A chance-experience, however, can turn into *Erfahrung* through the critical interaction with important works that encourage the reflection of our own experience. So the question that still needs our attention is the following: Can we, the subjects of an experience we cannot fully account for, describe this experience in our writings or, to use Benjamin terms, can we produce similarities if we are not yet sure what it is that we recognise as similarity? In order to answer this question I explore the connection between similarity and language in Benjamin's thought.

LANGUAGE AND SIMILARITY

In the 1916 essay '*On Language as Such and on the Language of Man*' Benjamin supported that there is one pure language of divine origin and the languages of humankind. God is the creator and 'Man is the namer; by this we recognize that through him pure language speaks' (Benjamin, 2004, p. 65). Since, however, all things are constituted by mental and linguistic parts, the language of things must be translated into the language of humans. Benjamin says:

The translation of the language of things into that of man is not only a translation of the mute into the sonic; it is also the translation of an imperfect language into a more perfect one, and cannot but add something to it, namely knowledge (p. 70).

With the Fall language becomes 'a mere sign; and this results in the plurality of languages' (p. 71). For this reason, *The Task of the Translator* is not to convert one language into another, but to integrate 'many tongues into one true language' and retrieve real meaning (p. 259). This means that humans proceed in a twofold task in order to retrieve pure language; first they translate the language of things into human languages and then they try to translate different tongues into a pure one.

Benjamin believed that on this philosophical foundation of language he could build 'a new theory of pivotal anthropological category and human faculty, namely, a primordial and authentic mode of *mimesis*, whose sediments were to be found in language'⁵ (Hanssen, 2004, p. 64). Founding his theory on Aristotle's *Poetics*, Benjamin described how humans are able 'to recognize (reception); and 'produce similarities (spontaneity)' (p. 66). An example of recognizing similarities would be found in 'our earlier ability to recognize similarities among astral constellations and ourselves' and the ability to produce similarities would be found in children's mimetic play (p. 67) Benjamin believed that the making of words was exactly this producing of similarities and he 'expanded onomatopoeia to include the nonsensuous similarities through which words of different languages were grouped around the same signified' (p. 67). So Hanssen asks: 'What else, then, did Benjamin do here than implicitly reinterpret the 1921 translation essay on which he now projected the doctrine of similarity?' (p. 67)

Benjamin's theory of language and his conception of similarity present indeed very similar elements and one could argue that if finding ourselves in stars and then producing horoscopes could stand as such an instance of similarity why could we not accept that we can produce similarities in writing while trying to understand the unspeakable in the chance-event? In the last part of this response I turn to this question.

CONCLUSION: CHANCE-EVENT AND WRITING

Benjamin believed that the most 'intriguing' instance of nonsensuous similarity is the one between *speaking and writing* (Hanssen, 2004, p. 67) and this belief invites some questions: If this strong similarity can be found at the level of spoken and written word, what would that say about putting the un-speakable moment of the chance-event into writing? Could there be such a similarity between the chance-event which is shapeless to the formed written word? Or is there a stage missing here? A stage of thinking that cannot escape happening in language. Heidegger (1971, p. 59) believed 'when we cannot find the right word for something' language makes its existence more present. Reading Stefan George's poem 'The Word' Heidegger meditates on the meaning of the following verse: 'Where word breaks off no thing may be' (p. 60) which he explains in the following way:

something *is* only where the appropriate and therefore competent word names a thing as being, and so establishes the given being as a being. ... The being of anything that is resides in the word. Therefore this statement holds true: Language is the house of Being (p. 63).

Following Heidegger, we can easily see that we can never be sure of what *is* or even if something *is* if this entity remains unspoken. The unspoken must pass in the realm of language in order to be fully an experience. But how can we pass from what we cannot say to that which we can write about without turning to something different from ourselves? If we do not proceed to such a step how will we know that in the process of producing similarities we are not producing ourselves or that an ill-defined autonomous self is commanding the writing? Finally, how sure can we be that in this process we are not looking ourselves looking at our students who are looking themselves in the river water?

NOTES

- 1 Setting aims in education is not something to be avoided; the teacher after all is ethically responsible to a great degree for the student's learning. Overemphasis, however, on the measurement of the success of these aims can lead to a very efficiency-oriented education where we produce ourselves again and again.
- 2 At first, he considers this phenomenon as resulting to a 'freedom of experience' but then he sees it as a characteristic of 'modernity's increasing atrophy of experience' (Hanssen, 2004, p. 55).
- 3 In *Selected Writings*, 2004, p. 267 (footnote of the ed.).
- 4 Walter Benjamin "Some Motifs". Retrieved from: <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/benmotifs.htm> on September, 20, 2009
- 5 This ability could have existed before the acquisition of language (Hanssen, 2008).

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