

Writing and Experience: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'Franz Kafka'

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The problem that concerns me in this paper is a limitation on the idea of the autonomous self, and my aim, in resisting this, is not only to give careful attention to an otherness to ourselves, but also to reconsider the act of writing in the light of what Walter Benjamin understands as its mimetic aspect. For in writing, we find a way of capturing what otherwise escapes us. It begins by explaining Benjamin's concern with the form of language in relation to 'the mimetic faculty of human being'. Second, with regard to this mimetic faculty 'the correspondences', in which human beings can touch the mystic aspects of the world is considered. Third, in order to think about the mimetic aspect of writing, Benjamin's essay on Franz Kafka is examined. In conclusion, I suggest a way in which we can understand writing in terms of its ethical conduct.

I. INTRODUCTION

Self-narrative seems very instinctive for human beings: not a day goes past without our somehow telling the story of ourselves. When we think about writing about ourselves, autobiography for instance, this is taken to be a matter of simply writing about someone who is presumed to be continuous, to remain the same, through past, present and future. In this sense, self-narrative works in order to reinforce the sameness of oneself. Thus, it is assumed, through writing we can develop our autonomy. In this way, the modern subject has engaged in an endless process of objectification of the self through a reinforcement of self-consciousness. To be an autonomous self is crucial for enjoying personal liberty in societies; hence, it is also crucial for educational practice. An autonomous self can make decisions or choices that secure the best conditions for itself, reinforcing that autonomy. There is, however, a down-side to this. The establishment of the concept of the 'individual' follows an emphasis on individual rights and on the laws or rules that can protect those rights against the claims of others who might invade them. Here there is a paradoxical situation: to protect the liberty of the individual, he is surrounded by many rules that require him to show responsibility and obligation to others. When something that encroaches on the individual's rights happens more rules are written in the rule book, and it becomes thicker and thicker. That is to say, we need to protect ourselves with more laws or rules in order to avoid invading others' right. As the maxim says, 'A stitch in time saves nine'.

From this perspective, others can be understood as the same as us; they can enjoy their liberty and be subjects of their own decisions and choices; thus they owe us their responsibilities as well. This is one of our starting points for thinking education in our society—that is to say, our presumption that we can understand others who can share the same conditions of meaning. This endless reinforcement of self-consciousness, however, can end up in a continuous separation of the ‘watching-self’ and the ‘watched-self’. This serves to confine ourselves to, on the one hand, a self-contained inner self (which is both watching and watched) and, on the other, to avoid the strangeness that is outside of ourselves. Here I want to emphasise this point: seeing others to be the same as us means in a sense rejecting any *otherness to ourselves* in our ordinary lives. Paul Standish (2001) insightfully gives his attention to the otherness of ordinary things. He writes:

[T]he sensibility or response in question here has less to do with a heightened sense of *being* than with the *responsibility* of remembering the extraordinariness of ordinary things—of their otherness to us and ultimate unfathomability even as they are part of our ordinary world (Standish, 2001, p. 345).

In the context of ethics, which can be misunderstood when equality is emphasised, Standish shows the importance of our response to otherness, which will inevitably be encountered in our lives. Furthermore, he explains that this responsibility ‘is realised to what cannot be directly named or represented’: this is a responsibility to what may be, to a way of being that is always still to come. However, if we think about otherness to ourselves in terms of an emphasis on responsibility, there is, I believe, a danger of falling into a relation to others that is understood in terms of debt and the performance of obligation. I want to shift the emphasis slightly in order to reconsider *an otherness to ourselves* in the light of its appearance in ‘our’ writing.

The problem that concerns me in this paper is a limitation on the very idea of the modern subject, namely the autonomous self, and my aim, in resisting this, is not only to give careful attention to an otherness to ourselves that is excluded from the confinement of the modern self or the progressive view of history, but also to reconsider the act of writing in the light of what Walter Benjamin understands as its *mimetic* aspect. For in writing, we find a way of capturing what otherwise escapes us: we attentively mimic what is yet to come or what has been forgotten. As I mentioned above, we usually understand writing in terms of an objectification of the self or self-reinforcement. In this paper, however, I would like to pursue another way of writing. My paper is formed of three main sections. First, in order to understand Benjamin’s concept of language I shall examine his concern with the form of language in its relation to ‘the mimetic faculty of human being’. Second, with regard to this mimetic faculty ‘the correspondences’, in which human being can touch mystic aspect of the world will be considered. Third, in order to think about the mimetic aspect of the writer or of writing, Benjamin’s essay on Franz Kafka will be considered, especially with regard to the concept of the *gesture* in a way it can capture an otherness to ourselves. In conclusion, I shall say something about writing in terms of its ethical activity.

II. LANGUAGE AS THE MIMETIC FACULTY OF HUMAN BEINGS

In considering Benjamin's language theory 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man (1916)' is the most influential text, which focuses on the theological aspect of language. In 1933 Benjamin developed a new language theory, provoked by the anthropological studies of primitive people and societies. In 'On the Mimetic Faculty' Benjamin shows us how the human mimetic *gift* (faculty) enters into writing and language.

To understand his concept of language based on the mimetic faculty of human beings, it is worth considering Benjamin's differentiation between the 'sensuous similarity' and the 'nonsensuous similarity' of the mimetic faculty of human beings. The former is represented by onomatopoeia; the latter is represented by dance, cultic ritual and language. Benjamin gives careful attention to nonsensuous similarity. Nonsensuous similarities are produced not through the same things—for instance, the sound of the blowing wind and of voices—but by the human body in its form or its movement. In relation to this point, Benjamin refers to the children's mimetic activities in play as an example for explaining a production of nonsensuous similarities.

When Benjamin considers language in terms of this nonsensuous similarity, he thinks of the most ancient way of reading, which took place 'prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars, or dances' which enable us to read the mysteries of the world (Benjamin, 1933, p. 722). Benjamin's concept of language finds its position in this genealogy. Benjamin tries to understand some kind of *pre-linguistic nature of language*. In this sense, language itself might be understood as a kind of *mimesis* of the strangeness, which tells us something—that is to say, *revelation*.

When Benjamin emphasises the form of language (that is, the nature of written language itself) in terms of this nonsensuous similarity, there is no difference between form and content/meaning of language.¹ With regard to this point, it helps us to understand the concept of experience that Benjamin tries to deal with here. According to Yasuo Imai, Benjamin tries to think about the irrational aspect of experience, which is excluded from the Kantian concept of experience (Imai, 2003). Susan A. Handelman (1991) also argues that Benjamin is interested in the mimetic faculty of human beings in relation to their pre-logical way of thinking.

If we understand language in this way, producing similarity (here we can understand this similarity in terms of language) is always the act of proceeding to read the meaning of the world. According to Benjamin, this mimetic faculty can be understood as a gift, in the dual sense of faculty and of being presented. This then, shows us the nature of language, which is produced by the inevitability that human beings can not help but see similarities and being similar to these (like a playing child which transforms itself into an object), and producing similarity, human beings are thus bestowed with this gift.

At this point, Benjamin raises the question of what use this mimetic faculty is to human beings. In Benjamin's understanding, nonsensuous similarity is related to ritualistic ceremonies, which are indistinguishable for primitive people to understand the mysteries of the world and its relation to their lives, namely revelation. According to Benjamin's concept of language, based on the mimetic faculty of human beings, language might be understood in relation to this revelation and, in its form, show mysteries of the world—that is, an otherness to ourselves; and with regard to this point such a revelation cannot be separated between form and content.

In order to understand the relation between the mimetic faculty of human beings, and its

production of the form—such as dance, cultic ritual and language, in which revelations can be read—in next section I will consider the concept of ‘correspondences’, which relates to Benjamin’s question.

III. CORRESPONDENCES OF MYSTERIES

According to Benjamin, correspondences are produced by nature, and are mimicked in the mimetic faculty of human beings, and so can be read in these forms of nonsensuous similarities, such as dance, cultic ritual and language. Such correspondences show us that the world can be understood ‘the law of similarity’, which means that macrocosm corresponds with microcosm. In relation to this point, human beings cannot be understood apart from this law of similarity. According to Benjamin, this is the reason why the mimetic faculty is to human beings, and rituals ensure that human beings share the meaning of the mysteries of the world (revelation), which are given in the correspondences. In this faculty, human beings can see their experience in relation to the mysteries of the world, say, in similarities. Here we can understand the gift in another dual sense, we are bestowed with the gift to see and produce similarities which shows us the mysteries of the world, and the world gives the correspondences in terms of revelation for us, to stimulate our gift, in order to show its mysteries in the flash of a moment.

In a general sense, similarity is understood in terms of the notion of being the same. Nonsensuous similarities, however, are produced in forms, such as language, that are different from such objects. When Benjamin thinks of language as one of the mimetic faculties of human beings in relation to the correspondences that are produced by nature, he understands the concept of revelation as *not* what can be read by *revealing* the cover from truths (mysteries) (or literally by ‘uncovering the truth’), but quite the reverse, namely by *veiling* over truths with similarities (language) that are produced by the mimetic faculty of human beings.

Benjamin wishes to produce ‘the world distorted in the state of resemblance’, where the objects can be seen with mysteries for us who live in our ordinary world.² In this sense language mimics the mysteries of the world by veiling over these mysteries with itself to produce the similarities of changing forms of truths. Here it is crucial to understand the concept of truths in Benjamin’s sense: truths can flash only when they are veiled for once in a moment, and vanished as soon as they have appeared. This is why truth cannot be expressed in a fixed way. Benjamin understands language as a kind of relic of the mimetic faculty of human beings after ritualistic ceremonies are ruined in this modern age. At this point we can see why Benjamin wants to think about the mimetic aspect of writing: it is because this mimetic aspect of writing can capture those mysteries of the world that can flash with them only in the act of writing.³

In order to understand the mimetic aspect of the writer or of the writing, in next section I would like to consider Benjamin’s essay on Franz Kafka as an extreme case of a mimetic writer or of mimetic works.

IV. KAFKA'S GESTURE: WRITING AS ETHICAL ACTIVITY

Benjamin quotes from Kafka's note in which Kafka says that what he has experienced is 'a seasickness on dry land. Each gives way and mingles with its opposite' (Benjamin, 1934a, p. 126). However, 'Kafka does not tire of expressing himself on the fluctuating nature of experiences' (ibid.). Here let us understand that Benjamin tries to translate Kafka's experience of seasickness on dry land into 'the world distorted in the state of resemblance', which enables us to touch the mysteries of world—that is to say, in this kind of experience an otherness to ourselves can appear.

In Benjamin's understanding, nothing but gesture makes Kafka have an experience of seasickness on dry land. Here let us understand this gesture in terms of nonsensuous similarities which is produced by the mimetic faculty of human beings. In the modern age we do not have the sphere of secure and divine ritual, in which people can share the same meanings of correspondence. Furthermore, according to Benjamin, 'the magical correspondences' themselves hardly can be perceived by 'modern man'. In this sense an otherness to ourselves can be understood as 'an irretrievable past'. Handelman (1991) points out that Kafka is a writer who is aware of, and struggles with the disconnection of tradition, or the shock and rift of modern life. Benjamin looks closely at Kafka's writings of gestures in his works, which are recurrently described in detail, and sees these works themselves as gestures that hide the mysteries of the world. In Benjamin's thought, Kafka's gestures show us, in his language, the way he struggles with what he cannot know. In this sense we can say that Kafka's writings of gestures are a kind of mimicking of an otherness to himself that Kafka himself cannot understand its meaning.

Thus, in this sense we can say that a 'mimic writer' can capture an otherness to ourselves in the way of such gestures in terms of writing. Here let us raise this question: in what kind of attitude can a mimic writer do this. What is in question here is an attitude toward others. In relation to this point, Axel Honneth claims the importance of the writer's attitude 'in a state of reduced attention' to capture an otherness to ourselves, according to his understanding of Proust's 'involuntary memory', which is studied by Benjamin. For Benjamin, however, 'involuntary' does not mean a reduction of the writer's attention. Benjamin writes: 'Even if Kafka did not pray . . . , he possessed in the highest degree, what Malebranche called "the natural prayer of the soul": attentiveness' (Benjamin, 1934a, p. 130). We have to be attentive to an otherness to ourselves in our mimetic faculty—that is, in our writing, especially in this modern age. From this point of view, we can understand the act of the mimetic writer in terms of an attentive response to an otherness to ourselves. Now let us consider Kafka's gestures in terms of following Giorgio Agamben's understanding:

If dance is gesture, this is, however, because it is nothing but the physical tolerance of bodily movements and the display of their mediating nature. Gesture is the display of mediation, the making visible of a means as such. It makes apparent the human state of being-in-a-medium and thereby opens up the ethical dimension for human beings (Agamben, 1978, p. 155).

In Benjamin's thought, Kafka is the most extreme exemplar of the mimetic writer, because of his attentiveness towards what he cannot understand or what he cannot fully know.

V. CONCLUSION

The present paper has sought to explain a way of writing 'our' experience in a different manner from the self-reinforcement that forces individuals to be autonomous selves and to protect themselves against others. It has done this especially in relation to Walter Benjamin's concept of language, which is understood in terms of the mimetic faculty of human beings. If we understand language as the mimetic faculty of human beings, language itself has its otherness to ourselves. In this sense, writing means to write *not* about ourselves but about something that we can in no way fully understand. Kafka reproduces the mysteries of the world by way of veiling over gestures that he himself cannot fully understand with his mimetic writing. This point might be related with what Benjamin discusses about Proust. 'For an experienced event is finite—at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it' (Benjamin, 1934b, p. 198). Writer who never tired of expressing himself on the fluctuating nature of experience needs to be attentive toward an otherness to ourselves that she cannot know before or after the moment she writes down it. In a sense Kafka's works are bestowed as a gift with mysteries for us.

This understanding of writing enables us to change our presumption of others. In general, we tend to see others as the same as us—that is, I and you both owe responsibility and a kind of debt to each other. Benjamin's concept of language, however, raises the question of how we can think of others if we start to think that there are difference between I and you inevitably. The mimetic faculty enables human beings to be similar to others, objects and world, but we cannot be the same: there will be a similarity with differences. On the one hand, we inevitably want to be similar to what is *other* to us, like a playing child. On the other hand, we are bestowed mysteries of the world that stimulate our mimetic faculty, which can now be understood in terms of language. In this sense, the act of writing inevitably responds to an otherness to ourselves in a way free from the idea of debt or responsibility, which, in a sense, is just following or protected by the rule book. This is because such otherness to ourselves always and already is, bestowed on us. In the act of writing we are aware that something is bestowed on us. At the same time in the act of writing we ourselves cannot simply persist in the same way as before: it can never avoid transforming the existing self. In the act of writing, we can attentively respond to an otherness to ourselves: that is, our attentive response can be seen as ethical activity.

NOTES

1. Benjamin is resisting language theories which see language as arbitrary and a limited combination of signs and contents.
2. See: 'On the Image of Proust'. This point is also related to Benjamin's concern with Mannerism, surrealism and comedy.
3. Benjamin argues that: 'It may be supposed that the mimetic process which expresses itself in this way in the activity of the writer was, in the very distant times in which script originated, of utmost importance for writing' (Benjamin, 1933, p. 722).

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