

Experience in the Very Moment of Writing/Learning: A Response to Ian Munday's 'Derrida, Butler and an Education in Otherness'

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What is Difference? The Emergence of the *Arrivant*

It would seem that there is an obvious difference between 'our' culture and 'their/other' culture. In educational practice, it is important to appreciate other cultures and to cultivate tolerance of them, especially in the age of globalization. Therefore, the national curriculum needs to consider literature not only of our own culture but also of others. Ian Munday argues, however, that there is a problem in this understanding of difference:

What is perhaps most significant about this distinction between an English Literary Heritage and texts from other cultures and traditions is that it assumes some kind of absolute distinction between these two categories. (Munday, 2010)

The reason why Munday argues that we cannot understand other cultures or traditions from the perspective of an absolute distinction between 'us' and 'them (not us)' is because this implies a desire to make otherness into a vehicle for understanding ourselves. Dividing the 'Orient' from the 'Occident' involves placing what is other to the Occident within the existing frame of the Occident.

To overcome this situation, Munday argues that we must recognise the 'otherness' internal to language that is indicated by Jacques Derrida's thought (Ibid). Munday puts it like this:

Meaning is not out there waiting to be worded. Rather, words as they come into being the world. Consequently, the signifier does not represent the signified, but brings it into 'presence'—brings it into being as an effect (Ibid).

Munday argues that '[w]ords/concepts differ as effects of language (Ibid)', therefore 'the binary distinction between a literary heritage and texts from other cultures (Ibid)' could be undermined. This understanding of language can also apply to the concept of 'truth'. 'Truth as such is produced by language rather than anterior to it (Ibid)'.

Following Derrida, Munday says 'all words are hunted/ haunted by other words internal to their very possibility of meaning anything (Ibid)' and this is 'the madness of language'. Munday emphasises that 'the iterability within language makes words other to themselves'. He argues

that:

[T]he disorder/otherness internal to language that accompanies its iterability, in undermining the effects of presence, allows for the emergence of the *arrivant* (Ibid).

Munday maintains that the concept of truth is itself an effect of language/the mark. This means that the arbitrariness of words/contents demonstrates the uncontrollability of language. Munday criticises the binaristic thinking of it, because it fails to make room for the unexpected or what is to come, that is to say, the *arrivant*. The approach or attitude of ‘*differance*’ is critical because it can undermine our grounded sense of what things mean, which sustains ordinary life. However, this is invariably what ‘is’ happening in our lives.

According to Munday and Derrida, we can understand that language cannot be characterized by communication if that means the representation/reproduction of ideal/original meaning. Here, we need to understand that the act of writing is not about producing marks that stand in for what is fully present (in our mind) prior to the moment of writing.

As a response to Munday’s paper, I would like to scrutinize the moment of emergence of the *arrivant*, which could be understood as the emergence of strangeness or an otherness, in the light of Walter Benjamin’s thought. According to Benjamin (1892–1940), experience in the very moment of writing cannot be separated from a chance event. This is related with the ateleological aspects of teaching and learning. In regard to this point, I would like to consider the moment of learning in terms of *mimesis* that Benjamin discusses in his essay titled ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’. I think that what Benjamin thinks in terms of *mimesis* is related with what Takuo Nishimura discusses in his response to Paul Standish. That is the moment of becoming, say, the experience of ex-subject. In my understanding of Benjamin’s idea, he thinks that the experience of ex-subject is always and already happening in ordinary life. This is what I want to elaborate on in my response to Munday.

The Moment of Mimesis: Experience in the Middest of an Event

In general, we can learn something new through imitating or copying the existing models that embody the values of one’s own society, culture and institution. This means that the act of imitation is understood in terms of representation or reproduction of the original models. In this sense, imitating is worthwhile for both individual development and sustaining society. Moreover, it seems that imitation is a voluntary action on the part of the individual who wishes to replicate models that can play useful roles in her society. However, if we place too much emphasis on the outcome of imitation and the voluntary aspect of it, an accident or a chance event occurring in educational practice or learning related to the production of new meanings will be missed. Such a chance event can be understood as the ateleological moment of learning. Whilst reconsidering what imitation involves, I would like to bring out the difference between *mimesis* and copy, and I shall scrutinize the former concept, especially concerning its *involuntary* aspect.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasises the importance of *mimesis* in terms of *poiesis* (creation). According to Aristotle, *mimesis* is an instinct of human beings and it enables us to learn.

Mimesis involves positive activities that enable human beings to open new possibilities of life. The limitations of this account of mimesis derive from the fact that it is treated solely in terms of aesthetics. Therefore its educational implications, which Aristotle recognises, are missed. One of the reasons that the act of mimicked is considered inferior to the creation of something original is related to the appreciation of art; the value of art does not derive from its mimetic relationship to nature but from how the artist expresses himself. The origin of this distinction or hierarchy results from a reductive understanding of mimesis.

In 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933) Benjamin is deeply concerned with the mimetic gift that human beings possess. This gift enables us to connect the world that expresses the mystery of the universe. Benjamin shows us how the human mimetic gift (faculty) generates writing and language. To understand his concept of mimesis, it is worth considering Benjamin's differentiation between 'sensuous similarity' and 'nonsensuous similarity'. The former is represented by onomatopoeia; the latter is represented by dance, cultic ritual and language. Benjamin gives careful attention to nonsensuous similarity. Nonsensuous similarity is 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 a model for explaining the production of nonsensuous similarities. Nonsensuous similarity makes itself known in what we cannot acknowledge without medium, and, for example, is produced in the way in which the human body moves. In Benjamin's use of the term, 'mimesis' has no object to imitate. 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, 1993/1999, p. 722).

According to Benjamin, we can see two kinds of mimetic momentum:

Nature produces similarities; one need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift for seeing similarity is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion to become similar and to behave mimetically. There is perhaps not a single one of this higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role (p. 720).

Benjamin shows us two kinds of mimetic momentum: 'the gift for seeing similarities' and 'the gift for producing similarities'. The former is the moment of ex-subject that occurs ateleologically; thought of in terms of an event or the moment. The latter is the way of talking or writing experience that denies the representation or reproduction of an original. Reconsidering mimesis in terms of the moment of ex-subject and writing, we can see the involuntary aspect of imitation that inspires us to realize the ateleological moment. This moment drives learning and generates new possibilities in our lives.

The moment in which 'I' become similar to that which is other than 'me' is the condition of mimesis in relation to the gift of seeing similarity. At this moment, the boundary between the self and world becomes blurred. Furthermore, this moment is an event that cannot be captured by intention or language. In this sense, mimesis in the gift of seeing that similarity is always already invoked before we ask what the aim of imitation is, in other word, what the aim of learning is.

Benjamin puts it like this:

All form, every outline that man perceives, corresponds to something in him that enables him to reproduce it. The body imitates itself in the form of dance; the hand imitates and appropriates it through drawing. But this ability finds its limits in the world of color. The human body cannot produce color. It does relate to it not creatively but receptively: through the shimmering colors of vision. (Benjamin, 1926/1996, p. 442)

According to Benjamin, mimesis in the gift for seeing similarity finds its extreme case in mimesis for colour. This means that we are invaded by an event that we never think of meeting. Mimesis inevitably occurs without any intention or ends. This moment can appear only when the gift for producing similarity is talking or writing it. Mimesis in the gift of seeing similarity is necessarily different from the moment itself because the moment of ex-subject always exceeds the gift for producing similarity, say our language.

A difference drives mimesis that produces similarity and generates a new meaning of the world. Mimesis that involves seeing similarity occurs involuntarily in a moment and mimesis in producing similarity brings this moment to our experience with differences. It seems that our seeing a similarity to imitate depends on chance. This involuntary aspect of imitation is related to learning as imitation. This provides one explanation for the fact that nobody knows what will be learnt by a learner. Learning driven by mimesis needs to be understood in terms of an accident or a chance, in Benjamin's sense.

The moment of mimesis (learning) is a 'tiger-jump' that transforms both world and self. Learning is imitating, and at the same time, transformation. In the midst of the moment of transformation, we become something other than 'me' i.e. an otherness. This is the moment that drives learning that opens new meanings of the world. Here, we can see the ateleological moment of learning. We cannot fully describe what is happening in the moment that what we call 'learning' occurs. If we want to think about the ateleological moment of learning that is driven by the mimesis of an otherness i.e. difference, we need to describe what is happening in the very moment of learning. In light of Benjamin's concept of experience, it becomes possible to see writing in terms of opening experience of ex-subject such that we can touch the depths of our lives and create new meanings of the word. This depth of life, an otherness, flits by always and already in the ordinary.

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