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## **Image and Truth: Paradigms of Modern Translation Theory**

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### **Introduction**

The field of translation theory witnessed two revolutionary shifts in the twentieth-century. These paradigm shifts are here attributed to the innovative theories of two key thinkers, the German philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin and the American poet and critic Ezra Pound. Despite writing in the same century, and making significant contributions to the development of translation, there are differences in emphasis and approach, which present a scope to be delineated and assessed. This paper, then, seeks to underscore their conceptual accounts in the discipline of translation studies, primarily in terms of how their theories arguably resonate, and where they have diverged along their particular paths.

### **Conceptualizing Translation**

Language calls for translation, and its voice should echo in translation. Not only because it is desirable but also because it is intentional, insofar as it is an ethical act to free language from its confinement through its translatability, which goes beyond the act of communication. Steiner observes, “The existence of art and literature, the reality of felt history in a community, depend on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of internal translation” (31). As per Benjamin’s understanding, translatability is possible and achievable. Benjamin strongly advocates translatability for any text, whether religious or profane. For him, “[t]ranslation is a mode” (“The Task of The Translator” 70). For a better understanding of the idea of translatability, the translator has to treat translation as a mode, which is governed by the original; in order for the translator to reveal translatability, he/she has to follow the law and the role of the original in order to achieve true translation. According to Benjamin, translatability deals with something intrinsic in the original, which exhibits itself in the translated work. In Benjamin’s words, “...[t]ranslatability is an essential quality of certain works...that a specific significance inherent in the original...manifests itself in its translatability” (71). This denotes

that translatability is associated with what is essential to translation; something significant in the original that manifests only in translation. Thus, languages remain translatable because translation can unfold “an essential quality” of the original language in its translatability. According to Pound, by contrast, translation is not only a creative act but, equally important, a form of criticism. Pound is more concerned with the form, rhythm, image, and diction, as opposed to syntax or abstract concepts (Gentzler 28). He insists that language can be charged or energized in three ways: (1) *phanopoeia*, in which the translator can charge the translation with musical patterns to enhance the aesthetic aspect; (2) *melopoeia*, whereby the translator alters the visual images in order to summon more imagination; and (3) *logopoeia*, in which the translator manipulates the words, directly or indirectly, in order to induce both of the effects by stimulating the associations (intellectual or emotional), which “...have remained in the receiver’s consciousness in relation to the actual words” (*ABC of Reading* 63). More significantly, Pound’s image approach stems from his concept of “energy in language” (Gentzler 15). As he puts it, “...the image is more than an idea. It is a vortex or cluster of fused ideas and is endowed with energy” (*Selected Prose* 174–175).

Both Benjamin and Pound agree that translation is an artistic mode in its own right. However, translation is conceived as an interpretive act by Benjamin and a performative one by Pound. Which is to say, Benjamin treats translation as a special mode of intention in each language. To illustrate, Benjamin provides the example of the English “bread,” the German “*Brot*,” and the French “*pain*,” in order to reveal the intentional relationship between a word and its meaning. The aforementioned words refer to different forms, but the intention essentially remains the same, which is complementary in each language; thus “the object is complementary to the intention” (“The Task of The Translator” 74). Pure language gathers various modes of intention into one by harmonizing the interaction into one language. As per Benjamin’s theory, the voice of intention ought to be heard in the translation through harmonization or reconciliation among languages, which can be attained only by pure language; this notion of intention is the only way for Benjamin to achieve fidelity in translation. While translation cannot unfold in the hidden relation between languages, it *can* represent this relation through intention as a way of redemption or “...by realizing it [the hidden relation, i.e.] in embryonic or intensive form” (72). In Pound’s view, however, translation serves as a special mode of acting—as if playacting in a theatre. The writer of the play is analogous to the rules that govern the literary tradition, the audiences to the readers, the translators to the “actors and actresses,” who perform on the stage and discern the author’s presupposition by relying on their

sensibilities and acting skills. For Pound, it is "...a rendering of a modus of thought or feeling in its context" (*Translations* 11). He further states that the translator should bring "the emotion into focus" (10). Hence, with the aid of extrasensory perception, Pound propounds to transfer the inner consciousness of authors through translation. In much the same way that an actor prepares for a role by getting into the character's consciousness, Pound's translator enters into the consciousness of the author of the work being translated. In both instances, the audience must suspend its disbelief and accept the idea that such channeling is possible. Translation as a performance act entails a theatrical instance wherein the translator functions as an actor on this virtual stage.

Benjamin differentiates between the translator's task and that of the poet. According to him, "[a] translation is a mode of its own, the task of the translator, too, may be regarded as distinct and dearly differentiated from the task of the poet" ("The Task of The Translator" 76). It is not necessary to be a poet in order to translate poetry; a good translator can do this task even better than a poet him/herself. He provides several examples of good translators who are not poets. For instance, Johann Heinrich Voss (1751–1826), who translated Homer's poetry, is a poor poet but an excellent translator. Benjamin claims, "[n]ot even literary history suggests the traditional notion that great poets have been eminent translators and lesser poets have been indifferent translators" (76). In addition, there are great poets who are also great translators of poetry such as Johann Christian Friedrich Holderlin (1770–1843) and Stefan Anton George (1868–1933), both of whom translated Charles Baudelaire's work with a high degree of skill. As Paul de Man's "'Conclusions' on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'" explains, "It is not because they are great poets that they are great translators, they are great poets *and* they are great translators" (de Man 81; emphasis original). The essential difference between the poet and the translator is that the former is chiefly concerned with the meaning to be expressed; that is to say, the poet is attached to the meaning that he/she wants to express, whilst the translator is more interested in the language. "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect [intention] upon the language into which he is translating [while that of the poet] is never directed at the language as such, at its totality, but solely and immediately at specific linguistic contextual aspects" ("The Task of The Translator" 76). To be more specific, the intention of the poet can be spontaneous and unprompted, whereas that of the translator is purposed and determined, and that is a significant *difference*. For Pound, by contrast, the translator's craft is *similar* to that of the poet's. For him, translating poetry is not that different from composing a poem. That is to say, both the poet and the

translator have a similar process in their literary work, inasmuch "...as the poet begins by seeing, so the translator by reading; but his reading must be a kind of seeing. Hence, the miraculous accomplishment of Pound's translations; sitting down before a text, he doesn't chafe at restrictions unusual to his lyric practice" (*Translations* 10). As long as the poet as well as the translator engage with the same activity (creating a new text), their task is almost the same, insofar as they produce artistic works.

Each thinker, discussed in this study, utilizes his method of translation in his literary practice of translation. To be more specific, Benjamin's primary interest is *truth*; in his preamble to his translation of Charles Pierre Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*, he metaphorically argues that "...for if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade" ("The Task of The Translator" 79). This implies that the fidelity of translation can only be achieved by literalness—that is to say, semantic rendering, as opposed to likeness or mere duplication of the original in order to achieve true complementarity. In fact, Benjamin argues that a work of literature is capable of conveying truth, which is not just a quality but also a part of continued life. As such, it can be revealed through *intention*. According to him, "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" (74; emphasis added). He asserts that "...languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express" (72). In order to unfold the paradoxical and super-historical relationship between languages, Benjamin creates his own philosophical term, "pure language," gleaned from his interest in Kabbalah, the Jewish mystical tradition. According to him, the connection between languages stems from the intention of language as a whole; such intention cannot be obtained by one single language, but as a totality of all languages, each supplementing the others. The ultimate goal of translation, therefore, is "...expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages" (72).

In contrast to Benjamin, Pound's pivotal concern is nothing but an 'image.' Image, for Pound, "...is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time... It is the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits" (*Literary Essays* 4). Pound treats Imagism as a form of poetry. By the same token, T. S. Eliot describes Imagism as "the starting point of

modern poetry” (qtd. in Sharpe 39). In fact, Pound perceives a poetic translation as a new poem that is simultaneously a reflection of old poems; his translations of Provençal, Chinese, and Latin are examples of this understanding. Such an assimilation produces a simulacrum, insofar as it entails some sort of imitation of the real. In this respect, the American scholar and translation theorist, Lawrence Venuti argues, “Pound’s translations put foreign texts in the service of a modernist poetics, evident, for example, in his use of free verse and precise language, but also in the selection of foreign texts where a ‘persona’ could be constructed, an independent voice or mask for the poet” (*The Translator’s Invisibility* 167). Through his remarks on translation, Pound attempts to drift away from the approaches that were exercised in his time.<sup>1</sup>

In their respective philosophical theories of translation, both Benjamin and Pound consider the significant role of history. For Benjamin, the value of art lies in its history, which manifests itself in an art form. As such, history must be preserved in translation. “[t]ranslations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its survival, has reached the age of its fame” (“The Task of The Translator” 72). This dynamic process involves not merely transferring the content but also establishing the historical values of the original text over time. Herein, Benjamin stresses the importance of history in the process of translation as a continuing growth; translation must reveal the historical significances in its representation of the original. A good translation does not destroy the original language, but rather, it liberates it from its confinement to continue its life and reveals its historical value along with it. Namely, the historical continuity of the art work is its survival in translation, insofar as “their translation marks their stage of continued life” (73). This is due to the kinship of languages, which makes it possible to achieve translatability. In turn, this “kinship of languages” arises from his Kabbalistic concept of “pure language.” As a result, history and truth will survive, inasmuch as they are a part of a genuine relationship that will be preserved in the act of true translation. In a like manner, de Man notes, “...the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original” (85).<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup>This notion of Pound’s invention of a modern paradigm of translation is further explained by Ronnie Apter’s *Digging for the Treasures*, wherein she demonstrates how some modern translators have been impacted by Pound’s theory. In her words: “Modern translators differ from each other in their styles, they have all made a sharp break with the kind of translation of older literatures current at the turn of the century. Following Pound, they translate using new assumptions about the nature and intent of literary translation” (Apter 3).

<sup>2</sup>For further discussions regarding the idea of translation as “the afterlife of the original,” see Paul de Man, “‘Conclusions’: Walter Benjamin’s The Task of the Transla-

relationship between history and translation is complicated, yet they are inextricably involved in what they represent. That is why history occupies a central place in translation. For Benjamin, the study of history is necessarily similar to that of translation, for he regards history as "...the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience" (*Selected Writings* 336). The echoes of fragments resonate in translation as well. Translation, according to Benjamin, is a mode of fragmentations of greater language; therefore, the original and the translation belong to a greater language—ur-language. "Thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language..." ("The Task of The Translator" 78). In this notion of fragments, Benjamin somewhat echoes Pound,<sup>3</sup> who likewise focuses on small details and fragmented images. Instead of producing a whole or unified image, Pound opts to render fragmented images, as these images constitute a single poem according to his estimation. The meticulous details in any given poem, for Pound, are paramount, because they can sketch a meaningful picture in the hands of a skilful translator. Pound is greatly interested in the fragments and small details in his theory of translation as they "seize the real" (23). In this scenario, the translator is the artist who "...seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment. His work remains the permanent basis of psychology and metaphysics" (*Selected Prose* 23). This suggests that the translator can be seen as an artist giving new life to an artist who came before him.<sup>4</sup>

For Pound, the key to great translation is "telepathy," i.e., the ability of the translator to get inside the head of the writer whose work he/she is translating. In his essay, "How to Read" (1928), Pound states that "every new heave is stimulated by translation; every allegedly great age is a great age of translations" (*Selected Writings* 34-5). More impressive, though, is Pound's ability to make the poetry of the past seem alive in the present, almost contemporary in nature (Apter 47). Pound's legacy of resurrecting dead poems in a modern vernacular is a renewal as well as a revival, wherein they are reborn by the means of his translation. He brings such poems to life by performing

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tor" in *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 85–86.

<sup>3</sup>The juxtapositions between Pound's and Benjamin's methodologies in this regard are best articulated by Richard Sieburth. He notes: "Pound manages to invent a poetic language that always hovers somewhere in between its original historical sources and its contemporary twentieth-century articulation—thereby aiming at that *reine Sprache* (or pure language) which Walter Benjamin defined as the messianic horizon of all translation" (*New Selected Poems and Translations* xiii).

<sup>4</sup>Pound conceives "...translation as a model for the poetic art: blood brought to ghosts" (qtd. in Edwin Gentzler 16).

an artistic act that fits within modern poetic standards in order to meet the audience's expectation. In this context, Venuti claims that Pound's modernist method of translation can be classified into "interpretive" mode and "original writing." The latter follows the literary terms of the translated text (Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader* 12). Thus, it is constituted as a "new poem" in its own right in the target language. Here, "[t]he relation between the two texts doesn't disappear; it is just masked by an illusion of originality, although in target language terms" (12). Pound's endeavours, though, are more complex than those of the translators who attempt merely to contemporize older works as he employs a mixture of archaic and modern styles. Nonetheless, his primary concern is *image*; he employs both styles, then, though the modern one is more influential than the mixed style (Apter 4). His technique also is to recall certain eminent authors from the past to the present. In his words, "[m]y job was to bring a dead man to life; to present a living figure" (*Selected Letters* 149). Pound's methodology is influenced by the Confucian principle: "Make It New." In this statement, Pound treats *translation as a matter of choice and predilection. The translator's voice becomes more pronounced in the interest of the modernized image.* In fact, Pound's achievement as a creative translator is due to his awareness of the necessary interaction of past and present (Sutton 6). Thus, he consciously alters the sensibility of the old poems and intentionally switches their aesthetics to appeal to the modern audiences.

### **Dichotomies of Translation: Domestication and Foreignization**

The oft-repeated insight of the German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) regarding the relationship between the author, the translator, and the receiver explores a new way to approach translation, which in turn has impacted the field of modern translation theory, particularly that of domestication and foreignness. "Either the translator leaves the author in peace, as much as possible, and moves the reader towards him," he argues; "or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him" (qtd. in Lefevere 74). This statement is apropos of both Benjamin as well as Pound, yet each increasingly diverged from the other as their respective thought continued to evolve. That is to say, Benjamin favors the foreignness approach and offers a more holistic way whereby the translator redeems himself by saving the voice of the author. "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" ("The Task of The Translator" 79). For Benjamin, a translator is one who devotes himself/herself to the noble mission of achieving fidelity to the truth of the original work. On the other hand, Pound ad-

vocates domestication, yet in a more radical way, inasmuch as there is, so to say, no peace whatsoever—just combat. In Pound’s words, “I don’t see that one translates by leaving in unnecessary words; that is, *words not necessary to the meaning of the whole passage*” (*The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound* 265; emphasis added). Here the translator’s mission is to ‘destroy’ the voice of the original, so to speak, as an act of invasion, yet it has to be according to the modern aesthetic principles.<sup>5</sup> Such an act results more or less in a close resemblance as opposed to re-presentation.

Metaphorically speaking, within Pound’s discourse the translator is the hero who conquers different territories (symbolizing different languages and cultures) and overcomes the voice of the author, bringing his/her work into alignment with the rules that govern the literary tradition, thereby ensuring that the work will be better received by readers restricted within their boundary of language and culture. Imagining the translator as a fighter in this context gives a clear sense of the brutality of such an act, inasmuch as there is no ethical concern to preserve the authorial voice of the original work. Hence, the voice of the author vanishes in translation, insofar as the voice in the translated text is always that of the translator. The translator attempts to bring in what the contemporary readers might expect to receive, as opposed to what actually is, regardless of the translator’s supposed radical act of undermining the essence of the source text and thereby erasing the trace of the author. In this vein, Edith Grossman in *Why Translation Matters* (2010) argues, “The undeniable reality is that the work becomes the translator’s (while simultaneously and mysteriously somehow remaining the work of the original author)” (8). In this context, Schleiermacher’s injunction that the translator “...leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him” (qtd. in Lefevere 74) highlights the role of the translator. It exemplifies Pound’s praxis of translation wherein he brings to the reader what he/she expects based on modern tastes, even if it entails reconfiguring the work in a contemporary idiom with no trace of the original voice.

Benjamin’s hero, by contrast, is the translator who endeavors to preserve the essential characteristics of the original work and carries them in the target language. In other words, the translator redeems himself by allowing the original work to continue its life in the target language. Such an act is noble and heroic, insofar as the translator pays a greater respect to the original language and even sacrifices himself,

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<sup>5</sup>As noted by the Canadian literary scholar Hugh Kenner, “The voice is always the voice of Pound, submitting to the discipline of translation in order to realize persona after persona with unflinching conviction” (*Translations* 14).



emptying out his/her own ego and becoming “invisible,” to preserve the voice of the original author/work as well as the particular historical context. However, the readers might find the translated text unrelatable because it holds archaic and/or exotic elements in its heart that shine in the translation and thereby have the risk of being idiosyncratic. In this sense, the spirit of the original lives inside the body of the translated work, inasmuch as there is no trace of the translator’s voice. In this process, fidelity is achieved through preserving the historical values and the idiosyncratic characteristics of the original text which, in turn, ensures its survival. Therefore, for Benjamin, the task of the translator is to ensure the survival of the original work by sacrificing him/herself whereas, for Pound, translator is the creator of a new work that caters to the audience.

Furthermore, according to Pound, the fluency of the target language is not essential in order to practice translation. Before the modern period, mastering the original language was deemed a *sine qua non* for a translator. However, Pound invents his own discourse that marks the beginning of exploration of the translator’s sensibility by combining his thoughts with those of the author (*New Selected Poems and Translations* 8). Steiner explains, “This insinuation of self into the otherness is the final secret of the translator’s craft” (376). Such a claim implies a new theoretical method, enabling the translator to attain a complete recognition of the other author even with a single language, particularly the translator’s native language. Put differently, the translator relies heavily on his/her consciousness to recognize and translate the other language. While this artful approach intends to gain favor with audiences, it might risk the impersonation of the original author. This is best exemplified in “Cathay Project” (1915), in which Pound translates a Confucian Chinese text into English without any command over Chinese language, which he did not learn until later. He relies on the notes of Ernest Fenalosa (1853–1908) and his ideogram method.<sup>6</sup> Pound’s gift, though, is to acquire a type of projected sensibility based on an extrasensory perception in order to “...get into the central consciousness of the original author by what we may perhaps call a kind of clairvoyance” (qtd. in Steiner 378). Hence, the focal point here is the subjective concept of cognising consciousness in opposition to an objective intention.

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<sup>6</sup>Pound’s ideogram method focuses on replacing ideas by images, particularly in poetry (from *abstract* to *concrete*). The notion of this method comes to Pound through his observation of Fenalosa’s notes on The Chinese Written Character and the description of how Chinese poetry is written.

A true translation, for Benjamin, "...is transparent; it doesn't cover the original, doesn't block its light, but allows the pure language as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original" ("The Task of The Translator" 79). This remark asserts that an accurate translation is a diaphanous body, and that the original is the heart that shines through the pure language in the act of translation.<sup>7</sup> In other words, the fundamental principle of pure language is not to produce a verbatim copy of the original, but rather to "harmonize" different languages in utopian fashion, permitting a rebirth of the translation while at the same time allowing the growth of the original. Such a dynamic process permits the voice of the original to be heard through pure language in the translation. This process is a complementary one, where harmony between languages can be maintained by faithfulness. That is, "the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation" (79). Benjamin advocates the fidelity of translation through the command of harmony. Semantic harmony, in turn, can lead to linguistic complementarity.<sup>8</sup> This approach bespeaks a good translation, which "...expresses the central reciprocal relationship between languages," wherein it uncovers the affinity of languages through intention because it would remain hidden otherwise ("The Task of The Translator" 72). As such, the harmonious orchestration is the key to activate a meaningful interaction between languages, which can be accomplished through literalness.

A good translation for Pound, however, is akin to a miraculous feat, as best described by Hugh Kenner. "A good translation seems like a miracle because one who can read the original can, so to speak, see the poem before the poet writes it, and marvel at the success of its wrestle to subdue his own language to the vision" (*Translations* 10). Here, Kenner claims that Pound matches his translation theory "...in a spirit of utter fidelity to his material, whether a document or an intuition" (10). Kenner praises Pound's creativity and sharp intuition in his way of understanding translation. In addition, he offers three strategies of what should be considered as a good translation. He claims that "so many Poundian principles meet in the translator's act that the best of his translations exist in three ways, as windows into new worlds, as acts of homage, and as personae of Pound's" (*Translations* 10). Even

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<sup>7</sup>Commenting on Benjamin's concept of "pure language," Carol Jacob's "The Monstrosity of Translation" observes "The unfixable task of translation is to purify the original of meaning: only poor of translations seek to restore it" (758).

<sup>8</sup>This is best articulated by Venuti, who asserts that: "Benjamin is reviving Schleiermacher's notion of foreignizing translation, wherein the reader of the translated text is brought as close as possible to the foreign one through close renderings that transform the translating language" (*The Translation Studies Reader* 12).

though the task of translation is simpler than “original composition,” it is still considered a primary text. For Pound, good translations are “new poems in their own right” (qtd. in Apter 3). Pound further argues that the translation of poetry can either focus on painting an image of the original poem or reflect the translator’s subjective clairvoyance. According to him, the translation of any poem can be “...one of two things: Either it is the expression of the translator, virtually a new poem, or it is as it were a photograph, as exact as possible, of one side of the statue” (qtd. in David Anderson 5).

It is worth mentioning that Pound is notorious for his omission of words and, instead, focussing on image, as in the case of his translation of “Cathay Project.” Thus, Pound’s primary goal is the revitalization of old Confucian texts into new modern versions. For Pound, the “Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It means the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures” (*ABC* 21). Kenner regards this approach as justified. He writes, “If he doesn’t translate the words, the translator remains faithful to the original poet’s sequence of images, to his rhythms or to the effect produced by his rhythms, and to his tone” (*Translations* 12). Nevertheless, such a symmetrical process is associated with the mainstream of aesthetic of modern literary terms, as opposed to uncovering the archaic treasure per se.

Benjamin conceives translation as an afterlife of the original work wherein the translator’s task is to ensure that translation represents the original work in that new life. The protocol of the translator is more or less a performative act of the original work in the translation—the original work never dies per se, insofar as it lives on in the translation. On the other hand, Pound’s gift relies heavily on his own sensibility and personae to intuit the author’s mental state and ideas—a radically subjective process. Dawn Tsang’s “Histrionic Translation” (2015) argues that “Pound’s work exemplifies...the melding and mingling of the author’s and the translator’s subjectivities can be a viable methodology” (Tsang 66). “This insinuation of self into otherness is the final secret of the translator’s craft” (Steiner 378). Pound suggests that good translators are like psychics, projecting their consciousness into the mind of the author they are translating. Pound’s art of translation arises from his heightened sensibility, which in turn has to do with the unique capabilities aroused in relation to a totality of impressions, thoughts, and feelings. This is perhaps best illustrated in his translation project, *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), in which Pound uses his own voice in translation, or “imitation,” instead of that of the Roman

poet. As articulated by Tim Kendall, “this is a pattern that the modern poet adopts to the syntax and vocabulary of his own political present” (198). It should be noted that Pound’s subjectivity is dominated by his tastes, which affects the modern standard of translation. In this vein, Venuti remarks that “the relation Pound establishes between his translations and the foreign text is partial, both incomplete and slanted toward what interests him” (*The Translation Studies Reader* 12). This suggests that Pound opts to convey only what adheres to his own taste and ideology and omits otherwise; hence Venuti remarks that Pound’s translation is incomplete.

### **Translating Aesthetics: Objective and Subjective Approach**

Benjamin as well as Pound stress on the aesthetic qualities in translation, but with different emphasis in effect. On the one hand, Benjamin’s legacy revolves around the objective experience of translation as an artistic mode. In “The Task of The Translator” (1923), Benjamin argues, “No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience” (69). In this paradoxical claim, Benjamin emphasizes the objective nature of the artistic experience over the subjective one—that is to say, the meaning of art is not related to personal experience. In his words, “Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, *but in none of its works is it concerned with his response*” (69; emphasis added). Here Benjamin stresses the objectivity of art. The artistic experience is an absolute one, insofar as it entails objectivity, as opposed to subjectivity. “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form,” he furthers the claim of the objectivity of art as, “...consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful” (69).

According to Benjamin, translation represents the original language, and this form of representation holds at its heart aesthetic qualities, which must be preserved in translation. Translation gives a new life to the original and the latter must be re-presented by the faithful act of the translator. Such a hybrid process of translation is objectively oriented, and as such is a foregone conclusion, as long as the translator preserves the value of art and history over time and therefore truth. The appreciation of the beauty of art relies on its representation of the original work, which transcends communication. That is, the essence of the original can be represented in the translation as an independent form, which entails truth. Namely, the context of the work of art, and its place in history, must never be forgotten or sacrificed simply in order to make it more appealing and accessible to modern readers. For Benjamin, translation is not only an interpretation of meaning but also an appreciation of the aesthetic of the original language. Reducing

translation merely to a form of communication, then, "...is the hallmark of bad translations" (69). When translation focuses on transmitting information, it utterly fails to capture its aesthetic values and the historical features along with it. Ergo, the breath of the original work will be lost and the historical significance along with it.

Pound effectually perceives translation as a form of artistic production, though its medium of perception is radically subjective. Pound's thought suggests a more subjectively oriented approach, inasmuch as it is associated with the faculty of perception as well as more centered on the receivers. The translator has to produce an *image* that appeals to the receivers, even if the translator has to choose what to render based on the readers' interest and expectation. Therefore, translation is constructed under the translator's hand by sketching an artistic picture that meets the reader's expectation. The translator, Pound claims, "...can show where the treasure lies" (*Literary Essays* 200). Which is to say, the translator's ability is determined by his/her ability to craft a translation that meets the readers' expectations. For Pound, the process is an artistic innovation, wherein the translator relies on his consciousness and sensibility to construct a desirable image. In this respect, translation is treated as a means of poetic creation crafted by the translator's intuitive consciousness to constitute a new piece of art based on the original work. For Pound, poems are a "...long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks" (qtd. in Donald Davie 75). Pound's sensible or palpable creativity enables him to put his remarks in the modern landscapes of translation as a translator and theorist. Pound sets a typical example for translators and gives them a wider space to play with the original work as a kind of innovation based on their subjective understanding of the original work. In this regard, Steiner argues, "Pound's genius is largely one of mimicry and self-metamorphosis" (Steiner 376). Yet, Pound's method of personification entails radical subjectivity in perceiving art (376).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, Pound's poetic approach might not succeed in preserving the truth, inasmuch as the translator has to distort the values of the culture in which the text originated for the sake of the literary tradition that governs the contemporary scene. In this vein, Venuti argues that modernism is a powerful force that seeks to constitute an "aesthetic autonomy" of the translated version by means of domesticating the

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<sup>9</sup>Steven J. Willett's *Wrong Meaning, Right Feeling* criticizes this method by stating that: "A poetic translation based on a serious misunderstanding of the original language is still a failure no matter how effective the English may seem to be. If we separate accuracy from invention, as so many Poundians like to do, then we are implicitly claiming that the cultural heart of the original poem need make no substantive contribution to the translation. It takes a very happy mistake for me to ignore fidelity" (Willett 151).

foreign text in order to comply with the standards of the “modernist agenda” (*The Translator’s Invisibility* 165). This suggests that the translator has to sacrifice the original meaning of the text in the interest of the aesthetics of the modern audiences. Consequently, the translator erases the historical value of the original text and distorts it by a renewal process that converts the ancient style to a contemporary one. Thus, the translator makes something new, but at the expense of the old text. Pound is notorious in reviving old text in a modern version. In this sense, Apter states that Pound has the sharpest eye in criticizing the Victorian approaches of being “pseudo-archaic diction” (3).

These radical changes in the development of translation—as a form of art by Benjamin and as a *modus* of literary writing by Pound—have led to new ways of understanding translation. Whereas, traditionally, translation was concerned merely with the retransmission of information, Benjamin elevates translation to acquire a primary and artistic status, which goes beyond communication. For him, translation is a mode of artistic writing parallel to any literary work. Pound, by contrast, redefines the concept of translation as a mode of literary production (Nadel 33). Pound argues, “A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translation; or follows it” (*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* 232). Such a claim indicates that translation plays a crucial role in constituting literature. In other words, translation is the method that rejuvenates literature. By the same token, Pound stresses that, “English literature lives on translation, it is fed by translation” (34). This suggests that literature and translation are inextricably bound, as translation simultaneously generates literature.

Benjamin is greatly interested in the process of interaction between languages, especially the question of what occurs when languages interact. For him, “the language of a translation can-in fact, must-let itself go, so that it gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*” (“The Task of The Translator” 79; emphasis original). The voice of intention is the agent to achieve pure language through interaction between languages. “To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation” (80). Therefore, “[i]n this pure language-which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word, that which is meant in all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished” (80). Pure language transcends communication, inasmuch as in the interaction between

languages, translation does not reveal everything. In Benjamin's words,

In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language, the latter in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, *is that very nucleus of pure language.* (80)

Nonetheless, the purpose of translation, for Benjamin, is to preserve the value of art as well as to ensure the course of life of the original language. This denotes that translation must not re-produce the meaning of the original text into the target text, but, rather, it must allow the growth of the original in the target language. Thus, translation is not a matter of reproduction, but rather, a matter of survival. On the other hand, Pound, unlike Benjamin, believes that the purpose of literature is communication. In his words, "Literature is news that STAYS news" and thereby represents communication regardless of its age (*ABC* 29). Here translation is the major key that rejuvenates literature.

Both theorists have distinctively broken with the tradition of translation, and yet they have approached translation philosophically while contemplating historical perspectives. Benjamin's accomplishment reflects in preserving the truth through intention and semantic harmony while Pound's sensibility appeals to readers' enjoyment in accessing the ancient text in a modern sense by sacrificing the archaisms of old-fashioned standards through the translator's subjectivity, consciousness, and sensibility. Pound conceives translation as a mission of conquest wherein the translator releases his consciousness to subjugate and assume control of a place or author by using his skills to produce a desirable translation. Ergo, Pound brings remote texts closer to the readers, but without a historical map—that is to say, erasing the border of difference and the significance of age in the interest of the modern literary terms. Benjamin, on the other hand, preserves the original language and allows its growth in the body of the target language. The original is the soul of translation and the latter is the body that inhabits the original. Benjamin maintains not only the historical value, but also carries the original message across the ages. Pound, though, examines translation as a renewal process, inasmuch as it is extracted from the old text, but in a modern form; Pound's translation is a rebirth from the original language, a renewal process which helps to "Make It New."

While Benjamin's perspective of translation entails a *survival* process, Pound's is focused on a *revival*. Pound is able to create a relationship between past and present by recalling the past in a modern voice. Even though both treat translation as a form of artistic writing, they diverge in observing it. While Benjamin perceives it as an objective body, Pound regards it as a subjective one. Interestingly, both thinkers apply their theory to their respective works. Undoubtedly, Benjamin and Pound's concepts, including truth, image, intention, art, pure language, and energy of language have fashioned the contemporary landscapes of translation. It is evident that Benjamin embraces the semantic approach of translation in order to preserve the idiosyncratic features and the historical value of the original and thereby truth. Pound, on the contrary, advocates Imagism wherein the translator can rely on the general hint of the original text in order to produce images, as opposed to ideas in the target text. The translator is free to render or imitate what he wants to convey by relying on his sensibility towards the translated text. The translator's invention is a magical mirror that reflects old texts in modern images. Whereas Benjamin's literary figure is survival, his ethical figure is truth, and his objective figure is art. Pound's literary figure is renewed production, his principle is image, and his subjective mode is sensibility and consciousness. Overall, both thinkers offer a solid theoretical understanding of different contemporary models of translation theory and practice that inspired many subsequent scholars and translators in the field.





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