

Afterlives: Benjamin, Derrida and Literature in Translation

Edmund Chapman

University of Manchester, UK

Edmund.Chapman@manchester.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that all literature is subject to ‘afterlife’, a continual process of translation. From this starting point, the thesis seeks to answer two questions. Firstly, how texts demonstrate this continual translation; secondly, how texts should be read if they are understood as constantly within translation. To answer these questions, the thesis seeks to develop a model of textuality that holds afterlife as central, and a model of reading based on this concept of textuality.

Chapter One explores how following through the implications of Walter Benjamin’s and Jacques Derrida’s usages of the term ‘afterlife’ in their writings on translation, language and history necessarily implies a model of textuality. The model of reading that the thesis seeks to develop focuses on language and history, as Benjamin and Derrida define these as the parameters within which translation takes place. This study emphasises textuality itself as a third parameter. Chapter One also describes how, following Benjamin and Derrida, language and history are conceived as inescapable, repressive systems. This, paradoxically, allows for the concept of ‘messianicity’ - the idea that all language, and every historical event, has the potential to herald an escape from language or history. By definition, because language and history are all-encompassing, this potential cannot be enacted, and remains potential. An innovation of this thesis is to understand textuality itself as having ‘messianic potential’; all texts have the potential to escape textuality and afterlife, by reaching a point where they could no longer be translated. Understanding texts as having messianic potential, but always being subject to afterlife, is the basis of the model of reading described at the end of this chapter. Due to the ways Benjamin and Derrida suggest we recognise messianic potential, texts are read with a dual focus on their singularity and their connections to other texts. This is achieved through the ‘text-in-afterlife,’ a concept this thesis develops that understands texts as inextricable from the texts they translate and the texts that translate them.

Chapters Two, Three and Four test and complicate this model of reading in response to texts by James Joyce, Aimé Césaire and Jorge Luis Borges. Concepts of textuality and reading are therefore developed throughout the thesis. The three key texts are read with focus on their individual relationships with language, history and textuality, and their connections to the texts they translate. Critics have linked Joyce’s *Ulysses* to multiple other texts, making it seem exceptional. However, the concept of messianicity shows that *Ulysses* is important precisely because it is not exceptional. Césaire’s *Une Tempête* demonstrates how a text can interact with several translations of ‘the same’ text simultaneously, and also that, although language and history are structured by colonialism and are inescapable, there is a huge potential for translation within these terms. Borges’ ‘Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote’ demonstrates the form of texts’ continual translation in afterlife by describing a text that is verbally identical to the text it ‘translates,’ yet is

nevertheless different in ‘meaning’ from its original. Borges’ fiction also highlights the endless potential for translation that is inherent to all texts. Through four chapters, this thesis develops a model of textuality that understands literature as defined by an almost endless potential for translation. The value of reading texts in the terms of ‘afterlife’ is to emphasise literature’s immense potential: all texts are continually translated in relation to language, history and textuality, and continually reveal further texts.

KEYWORDS: Afterlife, literature, Jacques Derrida, Walter Benjamin, colonialism

Completion of Thesis

Place: University of Manchester, UK

Year: 2017

Supervisors: Jerome de Groot, Robert Spencer, John McAuliffe