

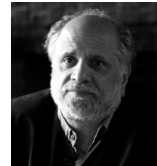
HOMI K. BHABHA

From: *The Location of Culture* (1994) London – New York: Routledge.

“If hybridity is heresy, then to blaspheme is to dream. To dream not of the past or present, nor the continuous present; it is not the nostalgic dream of tradition, nor the Utopian dream of modern progress; it is the dream of translation as ‘survival’ as Derrida translates the ‘time’ of Benjamin’s concept of the after-life of translation, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on borderlines. Rushdie translates this into the migrant’s dream of survival: an *initiatory* interstices; an empowering condition of hybridity; an emergence that turns ‘return’ into reinscription or redescription; an iteration that is not belated, but iconic and insurgent. For the migrant’s survival depends, as Rushdie put it, on discovering ‘how newness enters the world.’ The focus is on making the linkages through the unstable elements of literature and life—the dangerous tryst with the ‘untranslatable’—rather than arriving at ready-made names.

The ‘newness’ of migrant or minority discourse has to be discovered *in medias res*: a newness that is not part of the ‘progressivist’ division between past and present, or the archaic and the modern; nor is it a ‘newness’ that can be contained in the mimesis of ‘original and copy.’ In both these cases, the image of the new iconic rather than enunciatory; in both instances, temporal difference is represented as epistemological or mimetic distance from an original source. The newness of cultural translation is akin to what Walter Benjamin describes as the ‘foreignness of languages’—that problem of representation

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native to representation itself. If Paul de Man focused on the ‘metonymy’ of translation, I want to foreground the ‘foreignness’ of cultural translation.

With the concept of ‘foreignness’ Benjamin comes closest to describing the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference. The argument begins with the suggestion that though *Brot* and *pain* intend the same object, *bread*, their discursive and cultural *modes of signification* are in conflict with each other, striving to exclude each other. The complementary of language as communication must be understood as emerging from the constant state of contestation and flux caused by the differential of social and cultural signification. This process of complementary as the agonistic supplement is the seed of the ‘untranslatable’—the foreign element in the midst of the performance of cultural translation. And it is this seed that turns into the famous, overworked analogy in the Benjamin essay: unlike the original where fruit and skin form a certain unity, in the act of translation the content or subject matter is made disjunct, overwhelmed and alienated by the form of signification, like a royal robe with ample folds.

Unlike Derrida and de Man, I am less interested in the metonymic fragmentation of the ‘original’. I am more engaged with the ‘foreign’ element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the ‘unstable element of linkage’, the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which ‘newness comes into the world’. The foreign element ‘destroys the original’s structures of reference and sense communication as well not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are ‘preserved in the work of history and *at the same time* cancelled... The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed. And through this dialectic of cultural negation-as-negotiation, this splitting of skin and fruit through the *agency* of foreignness, the purpose is, as Rudolf Pannwitz says, not ‘to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German [but] instead to turn German into Hindi, Greek, English’.

Translation is the performative nature of cultural communication. It is language *in actu* (enunciation, positionality) rather than language *in situ* (*énoncé*, or propositionality). And the sign of translation continually tells, or ‘tolls’ the different times and spaces between cultural authority and its performative practices. The ‘time’ of translation consists in that *movement* of meaning, the principle and practice of a communication that, in the words of de Man ‘puts the original in motion to decanonise it, giving it the movement of fragmentation, a wandering of errance, a kind of permanent exile.’ (pp. 227-228)

