John Hughes, *Someone Else: Fictional Essays* (Giramondo, 2007)

The subject of the first part of ‘Holes’, John Hughes’ fictional essay on Walter Benjamin, is turning into a piece of Swiss cheese. He is not without consolation. As he watches himself desubstantiate he converses with a radio which tells him what he already knows – reasonably enough, since the voice of the radio is probably a projection of his own.

Most of these essays – overwhelmingly most – are troubled attempts, in styles done after the manner of the name on the masthead, to square solipsist enism with a belief in the adequacy of language to its represented thing.

The theme is ongoing, from the essay after the Benjamin piece, the fifth, on Proust, through ‘Bob Dylan’s’ riff on self-enclosure in the eighth essay (‘The traveler who left these pages . . . no longer had a tongue’), to the image of Osip Mandelstam offered in ‘Stone’, where word and world are coincident, to the essay on Jorge Luis Borges, where language is as blind as the writer himself. The drama is re-enacted in different guise between these same antagonists: the expansion of language into the world’s immanence, and solipsist self-contraction.

Admirable as Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Task of the Translator* is, much mischief has been done in its name. Benjamin’s proposal that translation of the essence of an original is possible if the pursuit of an exact sentence-by-sentence, or word-by-word, rendering be abandoned, has sanctioned much comfy-hazy haute culture waffle, in which gushing appreciation, invariably, overflows argument, if any. The markers of such gatherings are instantly obvious. Talk of an unspecified ‘sense in which’ this or that is so intermingles with hushed chat about meaning semi-mystically subsisting in the space ‘between’, or ‘around’, or ‘above’ the words actually used in a sentence. The unspoken premise is of shared standards which those in the know know, and those not in the know wouldn’t get if even if they were explained to them on a very big whiteboard in very large letters.

John Hughes can hardly be taxed with this sort of book-program naivety which in any case is often pitch-forked onto the side of the angels by a genuine love, even veneration, for the word. But there is as I read him an associated depreciation, close to, if not derived from, a Benjaminite position.

In a nutshell: the current of these stories, after the passages of solipsist stagnation have been negotiated, runs strongly in the direction of transcendence, and this, I suggest, is a course which, except when guided by genius, can’t be carried by literary effect alone. Because Hughes’ stories are (very much) cleverer and ‘deeper’, at least in their appearance, than many an arts program, the promotion of this point of view in his fictions has the potential to generate even more confusion than they.

We will have to back-track to the Preface of *Someone Else* to illustrate – to use an illustration Hughes uses to make our case for us, in fact.

In the Preface, ‘Max Bröd’, Franz Kafka’s benign betrayer, comes across a poet who at one point offers him a thoroughly Benjaminesque view of the relation between word and referent:

A good translation is a fire that leaves, like ash in the new language, a trace of
the original ... . Every word in a good translation is like an echo, a shadow that is also, somehow, the light that throws it. (xi)

A little farther on, the poet gives ‘Bröd’ a metaphor which relativises representation while leaving the represented item intact:

Imagine a book on the shores of a lake. A reader, coming across it, sees two books: one on the bank above the lake, and the other reflected upside down. ... At times the mirror increases a word’s value, at times denies it. Not all words that seem valuable above the water maintain their force when mirrored. (xii, xiii)

If we take parody as an appreciation which stands ready to bring a more or less gentle satire against its original, and homage as an essentially uncritical celebration, and think of each of them as markedly different reflecting ‘surfaces’ – the lake in cloudy and in sunny weather let’s say – we can see how the form of representation alters what we have – what we can possibly know – of the reflected object. There is no question of retrieving some between-the-lines, mysticised, spirit of the original once we acknowledge that the medium we choose defines our perception of the represented thing. This is the implication of the very figure that ‘JH’ – not ‘John Hughes’ to be sure, and still less John Hughes – via ‘Max Bröd’, has set at the gateway to his essays. (These pieces are, I think, homages, though the argument holds equally if we take them as parodies.)

And yet, the current does run hard towards transcendence, not only in the prefatory image of good translation being an echo of its original, a shadow which is also, ‘somehow’ (how, please?) the light that casts it into language, but throughout these excursions. ‘Calvino’ (in ‘Things’, the first essay) speaks of language as a fence one may move beyond to know what it keeps out (6). In an epigram to ‘Translations’ (the piece on ‘Paul Celan’) the ghostly author speaks in the manner of the prefatory poet of ‘a fire that leaves, like ash in the new language, a trace of the original’ (183). Even ‘Samuel Beckett’ is co-opted into the ranks of the believers, and made to speak of ‘a language (he) could not learn did not exist’ but in which (somehow!) ‘he might sing without a voice’ (195).

Coaxed at times by these stories to confront incomprehension with courage and pleasure, the reader might feel that it smacks a little of a fairy-godmother’s magic to have impossibility waved away by the hope that words and things might, after all, harmonise. Conducted to the edge of the abyss a time or two, it feels indefinably inconsequential to find oneself, like the second-hand shop proprietor of the third part of the essay on Benjamin, rummaging for completeness among cast-offs:

one day he will find (it might lie in his collection already, undetected), and probably in the most unassuming fragment of rubble, an entire city, Paris or London perhaps, built by no human hand, but perfect and complete, just as the entire Shema Israel was once inscribed on two grains of wheat. (28).

It is not sufficient, sometimes, to be provided with solutions.

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