

Introduction: *Found in Translation*

Andrew Ervin

So my biggest beef with old Walt Benjamin derives from that whole aura-of-the-original bullshit. You've read "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and certainly don't need *me* to recap it for you. Christ. The existence or non-existence of an aura, like that of the Supreme, is entirely irrelevant to our present concern: faith as the criterion by which we judge a translation. Among Benjamin's mistakes, count his adherence to the traditional historiography (one thing shared by evolutionists and creationists alike) that demands an original, a starting line, and an eventual and necessary end. That's one consensus we can do without.

A great novel is indeed a universe unto itself, but not necessarily one crammed into the size of a golf ball ready to go Bang! No. The work of art, I contend, has no beginning and no end and hence bears no hierarchical relationship to any other work of art, to any "original" that inspired it, or even to the artist claiming to have created it. The truth is, I'm here to tell you nice folks, that there are no originals. Never were, and there certainly aren't any now in this the age of digital reproduction.

Here's a test: go ahead and scan this introduction into your computer. Electronically mail it to a friend, enemy, university listserv. You've squeezed the toothpaste out of the tube. But the original sits on your desk, leaves its ink on your fingertips, right? Not so fast, Chachi. The copy sitting on your scanner is just that, one of however many thousands Drs. Sukenick and Harris printed up for your (indeed, our) pleasure. So the original is where—in the Normal, Illinois, office of *ABR*? Unlikely. Let's say the version on my computer at home, the one I'm typing in

what is *right now* for me but *back then* for you, is the original. I've revised and rewritten this sucker a half dozen times, so there are several versions. (And this hardly qualifies as a work of art.) Which is the original? I had ideas and notes for this essay before I started that first draft. Is the original this printed copy that continues to darken your hands, your coffee cup, and call into presence—as Jacques D would say—something or -thing that is no longer present? These are complicated questions, though not altogether insightful. I am leading the witness. My point, as you've already deduced, is that no thing is inherently original; originality is an award we bestow upon those works of art that remind us the least of what came before it.

Imagine the manifestations a novel goes through, and that go through a novel. Call me an idiot, or worse, but I'm on the record, here, as saying that *Moby-Dick* has no a priori point of origin, no beginning. Etymology, my ass. Oh, just as we can ignore the problem of induction long enough to run to the liquor store and back, so too can we come to a consensus that *Moby-Dick* begins at some fixed point.

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On the cover, maybe. *That* consensus is critically important here. But what we remember of it from high school colors our experience of the book, and so do the book reviews that we read before swinging by the local book mega-depository to buy our own copies. Your reading of Natsuo Kirino's *Out* or Dubravka Ugresic's *Thank You for Not Reading* be-

gins now, before you've even seen the book, and that consensus we share (still rooted in the same old historiography) is little more than a convenient illusion, a leap of faith. Likewise if, say, Javier Marías's *El hombre sentimental* has no inherent point of origin, how can we hold Margaret Jull Costa's English translation accountable for its so-called faithfulness to that original? The original is a moving target, the translation doubly so. But I'm asking you to see double, to accept both versions, to consider both "original," knowing full well how little that means.

How, then, have the critics assembled here judged these translations? Turn the page, friend, and see. It is my hope and, indeed, my belief, that these brave souls have approached a new way of criticism and, perhaps, of building history: one not tethered to notions of growth, progress, evolution but, instead, to change, difference, revolution. Faith, here, is the understanding that if nowhere else it is in the work of art, particularly one written in a foreign language, that we can reach some kind of consensus, however tenuous, and can share an original, however arbitrary. The critics in this focus—some experienced pros of the book-section circuit and some first-time reviewers—have each reminded us that that tenuousness exists, and together they allow us the rare opportunity to revel in it. For that, I am grateful.

Andrew Ervin, whose reviews have appeared in numerous national publications, is writing his first novel.