

Translation and Criticism of Art as Objective-Poetic Writing¹

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ABSTRACT

Drawing upon Walter Benjamin's concept of objective-poetic writing and the philosophies of language and art which he developed in his early writings, this paper seeks to demonstrate the way in which the genres of translation and criticism of art embody Benjamin's concept of such writing. This discussion begins with Benjamin's critical reflections on Kant's philosophy, especially with regard to epistemological problems. Benjamin seeks to revise Kant's philosophy by integrating religious doctrine into his reflections on the philosophical tradition. With this philosophical consideration, Benjamin discusses the pure language, its manner of communication, and why translation is meant to transform human language into the pure language. These ideas are presented in his essays "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" and "The Task of the Translator." In the context of Benjamin's philosophical and linguistic discussions, translation becomes a practice of "writing literalness," analogous to criticism of art arising from prose-writing, which he discussed in his dissertation *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*. According to Benjamin, both practices of writing dispense with personal affect and emotion, thereby appearing to be both objective and poetic in terms of effect.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Language, Translation, Criticism of Art, the German Romanticism

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翻譯與藝術評論為客觀詩性的書寫

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摘 要

班雅明在其早期著作裡論述不少關於客觀與詩性的書寫概念，也討論相關的語言和藝術的哲學。本文藉由這些論述基礎，探討翻譯和藝術評論如何展現班雅明所認知的客觀與詩性的書寫。本文的討論起點為班雅明對康德哲學的批判反思，尤其是針對知識論的部分。在將宗教性的義理融入哲學，以突破傳統哲學窠臼的思考下，班雅明在其兩篇重要的文章〈關於語言本身與人的語言〉與〈譯者的天職〉裡討論純粹語言的直接傳達，以及如何透過翻譯把人的語言移動轉變至此。在此語言哲學的討論脈絡下，翻譯是一種「字的書寫」，這樣的書寫類似於班雅明在他的博士論文《德語浪漫時期的藝術評論概念》所討論的藝術評論。在此，藝術評論的書寫是「平鋪直述」式的書寫。翻譯和藝術評論兩者都代表著一種特殊的書寫，其特色是去除個人的情感和情緒，在效果上呈現客觀與詩性的特質。

關鍵詞：班雅明、語言、翻譯、藝術評論、德語浪漫時期

Translation and Criticism of Art as Objective-Poetic Writing

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I. Introduction

In literary and cultural studies, translation and criticism of art are rarely considered interrelated. However, for Walter Benjamin, thinker and critic with extraordinary insight and intellectual capabilities, it is not unusual to look beyond conventional boundaries to discover the common ground concealed in these two different and apparently unrelated fields of studies and practices. In his consideration of the two fields, Benjamin takes as his point of departure the practice of writing, which is based upon his concept of language. In a letter to Martin Buber written on July 17, 1916, he writes the following:

I can understand writing as such as poetic, prophetic, objective in terms of its effect, but in any case only as *magical*, that is as *un-mediated*. Every salutary effect, indeed every effect not inherently devastating, that any writing may have resides in its (the word's, language's) mystery. In however many forms language may prove to be effective, it will not be so through the transmission of content, but rather through the purest disclosure of its dignity and its nature. And if I disregard other effective forms here—aside from poetry and prophecy—it repeatedly seems to me that the crystal-pure elimination of the ineffable in language is the most obvious form given to us to be effective within language and, to that extent, through it. This elimination of the ineffable seems to me to coincide precisely with what is actually the objective and dispassionate manner of writing, and to intimate the relationship between knowledge and action precisely within linguistic magic. (COR: 80)

In this letter, language is regarded as a linguistic entity that imparts itself without mediation. Benjamin describes it as magical or mysterious, implying

the immediacy or the unmediated aspect of language as it expresses itself. In accordance with this concept of language, writing is understood as an effective form of disclosing this very nature of self-expression through language. Instead of conveying any external content, writing is meant to expose the pure existence of language. Such an exposition is “the crystal-pure elimination of the ineffable in language,” which is realized through an “objective and dispassionate manner of writing.” This implies that the practice of writing is not a subjective act expressing any type of affect or emotion by an individual. Furthermore, Benjamin conceives of such “objective writing” (COR: 81) as poetic. This objective-poetic writing proposes a literary-aesthetic concept that the fundamental elements of the creation of a literary work do not necessarily lie in the subject.

This discussion concerns not just the simple act of writing and its effect. Rather, a deeper theoretical background concerning the philosophy of language and art exists, which is reflected often in Benjamin’s early works. We must then consider whether there is a certain form or genre that can properly represent such objective-poetic writing. One possible candidate is criticism of art. In his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Benjamin agrees with the early German Romantic view that the core of all works of literature lies in “the form of prose” (SW 1: 173). Based on this conception, criticism of art, which is meant to expose “the prosaic kernel in every work” (SW 1: 178), is practiced as a type of prosaic writing so that the form of prose can be immediately reflected. Criticism of art as such is regarded as objective because it is not meant to judge or evaluate the artwork. The other possible candidate for a form or genre that properly represents the objective-poetic writing is translation. As discussed in Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator,” translation is meant to express “the innermost relationship of languages to one another” (SW 1: 255). To serve this purpose, translation is, like criticism of art, practiced as a type of writing that can be regarded as objective because it is realized by a “literal rendering of the syntax” that does not have “emotional connotations” (SW 1: 260). In addition, Benjamin’s discussions of translation and criticism of art are closely related to the poetics of modern literature. In respect to the essay “The Task of the Translator,” the connection with modern literature is obvious because it was originally planned as the preface to the German edition of Charles Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*, translated by Benjamin himself. Although the criticism of art in Benjamin’s dissertation refers to the philosophy of art in the early German Romanticism, he sees that “the basic principles of the

theory of art,” which the representative figures of the modern literature such as “Flaubert, the Parnassians or the George circle” have in mind, are originated in this epoch (SW 1: 177).

Based on these considerations, this paper proposes that Benjamin sees translation and criticism of art as the proper vehicle for the expression of the objective-poetic writing. This fact is manifest in his early writings such as the essays “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” and “The Task of the Translator,” as well as his dissertation *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, in which both translation and criticism of art refer to the objective aspect of writing, which is closely related to his concept of language and art. The present paper attempts to illustrate the way in which Benjamin’s philosophy of language and art in his early writings conceives of translation and criticism of art as a type of writing that is both objective and poetic.

II. Pure Language and its Epistemological Implications

In a fragment written in 1917, Benjamin writes, “Philosophy is absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language” (SW 1: 96). With this statement, Benjamin sums up his intensive studies of Kant that began at the end of the First World War. A more comprehensive discussion of modern philosophy that conforms to Kant’s concept of epistemology and experience appears in his essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy,” also written in 1917. In this essay, Benjamin argues that Kant’s philosophical system poses two types of problems that can hardly be overcome. The first is the “conception of knowledge as a relation between some sort of subjects and objects or subject of object,” and the second, the “relation of knowledge and experience to human empirical consciousness” (SW 1: 103). These problems in Kant’s philosophy show, as Benjamin puts it, a “thoroughly metaphysical rudiment of epistemology” as well as a “piece of just that shallow ‘experience’ . . . which has crept into epistemology” (SW 1: 103). To redress these deficiencies in modern philosophy, future philosophical efforts should concentrate on a “deeper, more metaphysically fulfilled experience” (SW 1: 102) based on a sphere beyond subject-object dualism. Such an experience is depicted by Benjamin as follows:

This experience, then, also includes religion, as the true experience, in which neither god nor man is object or subject of

experience but in which this experience depends on pure knowledge as the quintessence of which philosophy alone can and must think god. The task of future epistemology is to find for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regard to the concepts of both subject and object; in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities. (SW 1: 104)

Unlike Kant's epistemology, which is limited by the "subject nature of the cognizing consciousness" (SW 1: 103), the "true experience" expected to be uncovered by future philosophy has a more solid foundation in religion, which includes "pure knowledge" based on the "sphere of total neutrality." Religion in this context is a "teaching" that is "the object and the content" of a "totality of experience" to which "the concept of knowledge" is "immediately related in its continuous development (*Entfaltung*)" (SW 1: 109). Such a concept of knowledge makes it possible to discuss pure knowledge. It also implies that philosophy can "encounter something absolute, as existence" (SW 1: 109) and in this way religion serves as a type of teaching for philosophy. Obviously, Benjamin believes that the philosophy he envisions for the future would demonstrate a close relationship between philosophy and religion.

It is this new epistemological foundation that supports Benjamin to state that philosophy is "absolute experience deduced in a systematic, symbolic framework as language" (SW 1: 96). To express this new philosophy, one needs a medium capable of imparting the philosophical knowledge that has its "unique expression" not in "formulas or numbers" but in "language" (SW 1: 108). To understand such a medium, it is necessary to examine Benjamin's 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In this essay, language is construed as a medium which "knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication" (SW 1: 65). It has nothing to do with conveying information, as Benjamin describes:

What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. . . . Mental being is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication (*mittelbar*). What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular

linguistic being of things. But their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated. (SW 1: 63)

Thus, language communicates only that part of the mental being which can be immediately communicated through language. It also means that language “communicates in itself” as the “medium of communication” in its “purest sense” (SW 1: 64). Language is performed to communicate what is communicable. It is regarded by Benjamin as “mediation (*das Mediale*),” which is the “immediacy (*Unmittelbarkeit*) of all mental communication” (SW 1: 64). This also implies the absolute objectivity and neutrality of language, which is neither instrumental for nor fixed to a certain purpose. Language as mediation mediates the mental entity as something immediately communicable.

Benjamin considers the equation of mental and linguistic being through immediate communication to be a “great metaphysical moment to linguistic theory,” which consists of the “most intimate connection with the philosophy of religion” (SW 1: 66). The metaphysical ground of language is based on the concept of revelation that is found in the Bible. Benjamin explicates it in his essay as follows:

[T]he expression that is linguistically most existent (that is, most fixed) is linguistically the most rounded and definitive; in a word, the most expressed is at the same time the purely mental, if it takes the inviolability of the word as the only and sufficient condition and characteristic of the divinity of the mental being that is expressed in it. The highest mental region of religion is (in the concept of revelation) at the same time the only one that does not know the inexpressible. For it is addressed in the name and expresses itself as revelation. (SW 1: 67)

Language as mediation and the immediately communicable has the characteristic of the inviolable word, the “most expressed,” which is understood as revelation. One can see the epitome of such language in the first chapter of Genesis, in which the “deep and clear relation of the creative act to language appears” (SW 1: 68). It is God’s word that performs the act of Creation, as manifest in the naming of everything in the world. Through the act of Creation, the created is cognized completely and immediately. This implies that name and knowledge are closely related:

In God, name is creative because it is word, and God's word is cognizant because it is name. . . . The absolute relation of name to knowledge exists only in God; only there is name, because it is inwardly identical with the creative word, the pure medium of knowledge. This means that God made things knowable in their names. (SW 1: 68)

God's creative word is name, which is knowledge itself. It is also the "pure medium of knowledge" that communicates God's word as the pure language. However, both pure language and knowledge refer to God, not man; man is the "knower in the same language in which God is the creator" (SW 1: 68). The creative power and the quality of complete and immediate cognition are not to be found in the language of man. As can be read in the second story of the Creation in the Bible, man is not created through God's word but is "invested with the gift of language and is elevated above nature" (SW 1: 68). Furthermore, all things are named by man according to Genesis 2: 20: "that man named all beings" (SW 1: 69). From this biblical verse, Benjamin infers a special connection between God, man, and things:

[T]he thing in itself has no word, being created from God's word and known in its name by a human word. This knowledge of the thing, however, is not spontaneous creation; it does not emerge from language in the absolutely unlimited and infinite manner of creation. Rather, the name that man gives to language depends on how language is communicated to him. In name, the word of God has not remained creative; it has become in one part receptive, even if receptive to language. (SW 1: 69)

Being endowed with the medium of language as a gift from God, man names a thing so that it can be clearly cognized. In other words, man is in a "position of receiving a gift and responding to that gift by naming" (Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities* 46). This is also the foundation of Benjamin's concept of translation: "translation of the language of things into that of man" or the "translation of the nameless into name" (SW 1: 70). Translation in this context has the "objectivity" that is "guaranteed by God," for "the name-language of man" and "the nameless language of things" are "related to God and released from the same creative word" (SW 1: 70). In this regard, God's word, as the name

that immediately communicates pure knowledge, is the pure language that is fundamental to all existing languages since Creation.

As long as the name-language of man “participates most intimately in the divine infinity of pure word” (SW 1: 69), it remains the language of knowledge as is God’s word. However, the Fall “marks the birth of the human word, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge” (SW 1: 71). After the Fall, man “abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete—that is, name—and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle” (SW 1: 72). Because the language of man is separated from God’s pure language, it is limited in the state of multiplicity and confusion and thus confined to a lower level. There is no longer a unity among God’s word, the pure language, and the language of man.

As Benjamin “chronicles the fall of language from the status of medium to mere means,” with the prelapsarian language as “a referent point” (Jennings 101), he makes it possible to define the historical meaning of human existence in terms of the consequences of the fall of language. After the Fall, man not only has to use multiple languages lacking immediate communication but also is deprived of the “spirit of language,” which is the “common foundation” (SW 1: 72) that he shared with things. In this historical condition, the language of man is incapable of fully translating the nameless into the named, and any attempt to do so becomes a process of “overnaming” (SW 1: 73). During this time of linguistic confusion, man’s efforts at translation have become an act of naming that “names the distance from God and thus marks that which has been lost” (A. Benjamin 118), specifically the pure language, the gift given by God. After the Fall, man as translator is “in a situation of debt,” and his task is “to render that which must have been given,” as Derrida puts it in his essay “*Des tours de Babel*” (200). Translation therefore becomes a movement toward the once lost—the pure language—as Benjamin concludes in his essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”: “All higher language is a translation of lower ones, until in ultimate clarity the word of God unfolds, which is the unity of this movement made up of language” (SW 1: 74).

The 1916 essay, which ends with the implication that all languages should be moved toward God’s word—the pure language—by translation, seems to be a response to the suggestion given in the essay “On the Program of the Coming Philosophy”:

A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize. The realm of religion should be mentioned as the foremost of these. (SW 1: 108)

As Benjamin argues for the pure language as a medium immediately mediating the pure knowledge, he constructs an epistemological system of the linguistic nature. Translation in this context is regarded as an attempt to recall and to reveal the pure language despite its absence. Benjamin's concept of translation will be discussed later. For the moment, the discussion will turn to Benjamin's view on art in his dissertation in which art is considered a medium similar to the pure language.

III. Art as a Medium of Reflection

In the introduction of the French edition of *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe notes that "everything turns around the name of Kant at the beginning" of Benjamin's preparation for his dissertation (14). Initially, Kant's philosophy of history was intended to be the topic of his doctoral thesis, for he was deeply convinced that "the ultimate metaphysical dignity of a philosophical view that truly intends to be canonical will always manifest itself most clearly in its confrontation with history" (COR: 98). However, as he went deeper into his research on Kant, Benjamin was disappointed by Kant's attitude toward history and its philosophy. This disappointment is expressed in a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem, written on December 23, 1917:

As far as Kant's history of philosophy is concerned, my exaggerated expectations have met with disappointment as a result of having read both of the main works that deal specifically with this (*Ideas for a Universal History* . . . [*Ideen zu einer Geschichte*] and *Perpetual Peace* [*Zum ewigen Frieden*]). This is unpleasant for me, especially in view of my plans for a dissertation topic Kant is less concerned with history than with certain historical constellations of ethical interest. And what's more, it is precisely the ethical side of history that is represented as inadequate for

special consideration, and the postulate of a scientific mode of observation and method is posited. (COR: 105)

Once Benjamin had realized that Kant's philosophy could not meet the needs of his dissertation, he turned his attention to early German Romanticism. In another letter to Gershom Scholem, Benjamin conveys his thoughts on Romanticism, specifically early German Romanticism:

The core of early romanticism is religion and history. Its infinite profundity and beauty in comparison to all late romanticism derives from the fact that the early romantics did not appeal to religious and historical facts for the intimate bond between these two spheres, but rather tried to produce in their own thought and life the higher sphere in which both spheres had to coincide In one sense, whose profundity would first have to make clear, romanticism seeks to accomplish for religion what Kant accomplished for theoretical subjects: to reveal its form. But does religion have a form? In any case, under history early romanticism imagined something analogous to this. (COR: 88-89)

Here, Benjamin touches on the essential points of his dissertation: the "higher sphere" on which the "intimate bound" of different spheres is based, and the form that can present such a unique sphere. His studies of early German Romanticism confirm Benjamin's belief in the likelihood of establishing a close relationship between philosophy and religion, as suggested in his essay "On the Program of the Coming Philosophy." It is the concept of art in early German Romanticism that gives Benjamin the idea for the topic of his dissertation:

Only since romanticism has the following view become predominant: that a work of art in and of itself, and without reference to theory or morality, can be understood in contemplation alone, and that the person contemplating it can do it justice. The relative autonomy of the work of art vis-à-vis art, or better, its exclusively transcendental dependence on art, has become the prerequisite of romantic art criticism. I would undertake to prove that, in this regard, Kant's aesthetics constitute the underlying premise of romantic art criticism. (COR: 119)

In spite of his dissatisfaction with Kant, Benjamin retains the key concepts of Kant's critical philosophy as he tries to explore the problematic of the early German Romantic aesthetics, which he sees as consisting in the relationship between art, artwork, and criticism of art. The suggested autonomy of an artwork and its "transcendental dependence on art" presuppose the Kantian aesthetics developed in the *Critique of Judgment*, in which aesthetic judgment can be understood as "the unraveling of form" that is grounded in "objective concepts" (Weber, *Mass Mediaurus* 17). This aspect of Kantian aesthetics is incorporated in his dissertation, as he argues that early German Romanticism secures, "from the side of the object or structure, [the] very autonomy in the domain of art that Kant, in the third *Critique*, had lent to the power of judgment" (SW 1: 155). It is obvious that the "transcendental dependence on art" is consistent with the concept of form in Kantian aesthetics which serves as the essential presupposition of Romantic criticism of art.

Such connection with Kant implies a theory of knowledge being inherent to the early Romantic concept of art. However, Johann Gottlieb Fichte's concept of reflection, as discussed in his first version of *The Science of Knowledge (Wissenschaftslehre)*, published in 1794, has a more direct influence on epistemological considerations in early Romantic discussions of art. Fichte defines his concept of reflection as the "reflection of a form, and in this way proves the immediacy of the knowledge given in it" (SW 1: 122). Reflective thinking is at once a form and the content of an immediate cognition—a concept on which both Fichte and the early German Romantics agree:

Fichte supposes that . . . he can ground an immediate and certain cognition through the connection of two forms of consciousness (that of form and the form of the form, or of knowing and the knowing of knowing), forms that pass over into one another and return into themselves. It is a question . . . of the self-cognition of a method, of something formal—and the absolute subject represents nothing other than this. The forms of consciousness in their transition into one another are the sole object of immediate cognition, and this transition is the sole method capable of grounding that immediacy and making it intelligible. This theory of cognition, with its radical, mystical formalism[,]has . . . the deepest affinity with the early Romantic theory of art. (SW 1 122-123)

The understanding of form derived from Fichte's concept of reflection opens a methodological foundation upon which the early Romantics could elaborate their own theory of art. However, what appeals to the early Romantics is not only the immediacy guaranteed by reflection but also "a peculiar infinity" in the process of reflection (SW 1: 123). Concerning the problem of infinity, the question of whether infinity can be attributed to reflection is the point upon which Fichte and the early Romantics differ. Fichte rejects the idea of infinity in his concept of reflection. He believes that reflection "lies in the absolute thesis" with the "absolute 'I'" (SW 1: 128). Due to the acts of positing the "I" and counter-positing the "not-I," the process of reflection is not infinite, for it eventually becomes the absolute "I."

Unlike Fichte who thinks that the "I" is both the beginning and end of reflection, the representative figures of the early German Romanticism, such as Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, emphasize the infinity of reflection, for their concept of reflection is not premised by the "I" as the constitutive subject. In Benjamin's view, there are three levels to Schlegel's concept of reflection. The first is "mere thinking" or "thinking of something" that is a "matter of reflection" (SW 1: 127). The second is reflection proper, which Benjamin describes as follows:

Nonetheless, reflection properly speaking arises in its full significance only on the second level, in the thinking of that first thinking In this second thinking, or, to use Friedrich Schlegel's term, "reason," the first act of thinking in fact returns transformed at a higher level: it has become "the form of the form as its content"—that is, the second level has emerged from the first level, through a genuine reflection, and thus without mediation. In other words, the thinking on the second level has arisen from the first by its own power and self-activity—namely, as the self-knowledge of the first. (SW 1: 127)

The second level of reflection is the thinking of thinking and is regarded as a "formal principle" that has a "canonical status and authority" (Phelan 74) in the early Romantic concept of reflection. In spite of their similar concepts of form, the early Romantics' and Fichte's deductions of reflection diverge concerning the problem of the subject "I." Because reflection on the second level is made possible by its "own power and self-activity" of thinking, the early Romantics' concept of reflection is not based on the "ontological

determination,” but on the “mere thinking-oneself (*Sich-Selbst-Denken*), as a phenomenon” that is “proper to everything, for everything is a self” (SW 1: 128). In this sense, every reflection is “immediate in itself” (SW 1: 126), regardless of the level upon which it is taking place. This, however, is quite a different concept from Fichte’s view: that reflection should be “located in the original being” of the “I” and that, therefore, “a self belongs only to the ‘I’” (SW 1: 128). Owing to the firm attachment to or the confinement of the “I,” the Fichtean reflection can occur in “only a single case” (SW 1: 128) with the original positing of the “I”

Unlike Fichte’s understanding of reflection, the early Romantic conceptualization of reflection is not limited, and it continues to reach a third level. At this level, the second level of reflection, or reflection proper, splits itself into either the “object thought” of thinking or the “thinking subject” of thinking (SW 1: 129). Thus, the ambiguity of the subject-object relation and the characteristic infinitude inherent to the early Romantic concept of reflection are indicated at the third level. As Benjamin writes:

The rigorous original form of second-level reflection is assailed and shaken by the ambiguity in third-level reflection. But this ambiguity would have to unfold into an ever more complex plurality of meanings at each successive level. On this state of affairs rests the peculiar character of the infinitude of reflection to which the Romantics laid claim: the dissolution of the proper form of reflection in the face of the absolute. Reflection expands without limit or check, and the thinking given form in reflection turns into formless thinking which directs itself upon the absolute. (SW 1: 128)

Because of the ambiguity that suggests the liberation from the singleness of the subject “I,” reflection for the early Romantics becomes an infinite process as the proper form of reflection is dissolved into the formless thinking that turns to the direction of the absolute. Such an infinite process is not an “infinity of continuous advance (*Fortgang*)” that is no more than “endless and empty process” but an “infinity of connectedness (*Zusammenhang*)” (SW 1: 126). Benjamin cites Hölderlin’s words, “they hang together infinitely (exactly),” which express precisely what Schlegel and Novalis have in mind, to define the infinitude of the early Romantic concept of reflection. This he understands as “a full infinitude of interconnection (*Zusammenhang*)” in

which everything “is to hang together in an infinitely manifold way” (SW 1: 126). The connectedness or interconnection implies a system in which different levels of reflection cohere or hang together closely, as the higher-level comprises the lower level. In this sense, infinity is a type of “multilateral simultaneity” (Phelan 74). The early Romantic understanding of reflection, therefore, does not “take its course into an empty infinity, but is in itself substantial and filled” (SW 1: 129). Such infinitude of interconnection is crucial because it is the presupposition for the “intensification” or “potentiation” (SW 1: 146) of the early Romantic reflection, as it unfolds itself from the lower level up to the highest of the absolute in which the “process of a continually increasing reflection” (Gasché 58) takes place.

While the early Romantic concept of reflection moves toward the absolute, and, therefore, conceives different stages of reflection as comprising a whole, distinctive levels of clarity are indicated as Benjamin argues:

[O]ne would have to assume that absolute reflection comprises the maximum of reality, whereas original reflection comprises the minimum of reality, in the sense that, though both enclose all the content of reality and all of thinking, that content is developed to its highest clarity in the former, while remaining undeveloped and unclear in the latter. . . . Schlegel saw, immediately and without holding this in need of a proof, the whole of the real unfolding in its full content, with increasing distinctness up to the highest clarity in the absolute, in the stages of reflection. (SW 1: 130)

Enclosing the maximal content of reality, the absolute becomes the “closed and completed reflection” and can “grasp itself reflectively without mediation” (SW 1: 129). This is possible because early Romantic reflection is “immediate in itself” (SW 1: 126). What is mediated here is reflection in its immediacy. On the basis of this “mediated immediacy,” the full content of the absolute is “developed to the highest clarity” by the gradual self-manifestation of reflection (SW 1: 126). Therefore, Benjamin defines the absolute as “medium of reflection (*Reflexionsmedium*)” (SW 1: 132) with the following argument:

Reflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium. Schlegel did not use the term “medium” himself; nonetheless, he attached the greatest importance to the constantly

uniform connection in the absolute or in the system, both of which we have to interpret as the connectedness of the real, not in its substance (which is everywhere the same) but in the degrees of its clear unfolding. (SW 1 132-133)

The “constantly uniform connection in the absolute” implicitly presupposes a formal principle of reflection based on the form of the thinking of thinking in which, unlike the Fichtean reflection, the consciousness of the subject “I” is absent. Instead, the early Romantic reflection is the “reflection in the absolute of art” (SW 1: 134). The form of the thinking of thinking is regarded, according to Schlegel, “as aesthetic form, as the primal cell of art” (SW 1: 135). In this sense, the determination of the absolute as a medium of reflection lies in art. The early Romantic concept of art is, therefore, grounded in “a theory of art as a medium of reflection and of the work as a center of reflection” (SW 1: 155).

Referring to Schlegel’s manner of thought in his dissertation, Benjamin is inclined to see that art, with its system of reflective thinking, is a type of “linguistic thinking” (SW 1: 140). Like the pure language, a medium that immediately mediates the pure knowledge, art is considered to be a medium of reflection that reveals the self-knowledge of reflection in its immediacy. Both art and pure language are defined in Benjamin’s early writings as media that are neutral and autonomous, for they are independent of the existence of the subject. As media, they directly manifest the knowledge which is self-reflexive, self-substantial and neutral. However, they require a specific form of expression to be perceived and cognized. As Benjamin argues in his dissertation and in his essay “The Task of the Translator,” this specific form of expression is to be realized by criticism of art and translation.

IV. Criticism of Art

In his dissertation, Benjamin sees that criticism of art is meant not to judge or to evaluate the artwork but to demonstrate “the relation of the individual work to the idea of art and thereby the idea of the individual work itself” (SW 1: 156). He argues that

[e]very critical understanding of an artistic entity is, as reflection in the entity, nothing other than a higher, self-actively originated degree of this entity’s consciousness. Such intensification of

consciousness in criticism is in principle infinite; criticism is therefore the medium in which the restriction of the individual work refers methodically to the infinitude of art and finally is transformed into that infinitude. For it is self-evident that art, as medium of reflection, is infinite. (SW 1: 152)

Accordingly, criticism of art is the “unfolding of reflection generated in the artwork” (Steiner 24). The individual artwork is gradually and intensively transformed into art-in-general through criticism. This process of criticism “depends on the germ cells of reflection, the positively formal moments of work that it resolves into universally formal moments” (SW 1: 156). It is the principle of form that enables criticism to manifest the dependent relation of the individuality of the artwork to the universality of art. The fundamental meaning of form for the artwork is described by Benjamin in the following passage:

[T]he pure essence of reflection announces itself to the early Romantics in the purely formal appearance of the work of art. Thus, form is the objective expression of the reflection proper to the work, the reflection that constitutes its essence. Form is the possibility of reflection in the work. It grounds the work a priori, therefore, as a principle of existence; it is through its form that the work of art is a living center of reflection. (SW 1: 156)

Being the “objective expression of the reflection proper to” as well as the “possibility of reflection in” the artwork, the form enables the artwork to be the center of reflection, which is the starting point or the “germ cell” for the reflection to unfold toward the absolute. Form as such presupposes the “rigorous self-limitation of reflection” (SW 1: 156) on which the individual artwork rests. However, it implies not only the individuation and limitation of an artwork but also the possibility of its being de-limited. Benjamin, by citing Schlegel, indicates that a work “is formed when it is everywhere sharply delimited, but within those limits is limitless ..., when it is wholly true to itself, is everywhere the same, yet elevated above itself” (SW 1: 158). As form, the artwork in its singularity is connected with art-in-general. In Benjamin’s words, the work of art is by virtue of form “a moment of the absolute medium of reflection” (SW 1: 158). In this sense, form is the “criterion of an immanent structure specific to the work itself” that serves as

the “cardinal principle of critical activity” (SW 1: 155). It is a type of “immanent criticism” (SW 1: 159) whose task is to drive the individual artwork out of itself in order to elevate it to the ultimate sphere of the absolute, i.e. that of the idea of art, which Benjamin defines as follows:

In terms of method, the entire Romantic theory of art rests on the definition of the medium of absolute reflection as art—more precisely, as the idea of art. Since the organ of artistic reflection is form, the idea of art is defined as the medium of reflection of forms. In this medium all the presentational forms hang constantly together, interpenetrate one another, and merge into the unity of the absolute of art form which is identical with the idea of art. Thus, the Romantic idea of the unity of art lies in the idea of a continuum of forms. (SW 1: 165)

The “continuum of forms” implies the plurality of art forms that are constantly connected or hung together in “the absolute of art form” or “the idea of art.” In this regard, reflection “lies enclosed in the presentational form of the work and unfolds itself in criticism, in order finally to reach fulfillment in the lawful continuum of forms” (SW 1: 165).

In the first chapter of his dissertation, Benjamin clearly states that the early German Romantics think “above all of literature (*Poesie*)”² (SW 1: 118) when they speak of art. According to this background, the optimal representation of the idea of art lies in Schlegel’s “progressive universal poetry (*progressive Universalpoesie*)” (SW 1: 168), as put forth in his famous 116th *Athenäum*-Fragment. Literature as such is, on the one hand, able to “unite all the separate genres of poetry (literature),” in that “it embraces everything so long as it is poetic”; on the other hand, the progressive universal poetry as the unity of all possible genres or forms of literature is “literary art (*Dichtkunst*) itself” (SW 1: 166). Since the progressive universal

² The German word *Poesie* refers not only to the literary genre poetry but also to literature in general. It is important to accurately define this word, for literature is regarded as a writing of cross-genres in the early German Romantic view. Regarding this topic, in *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy write: “Beyond divisions and all de-finition, this *genre* is thus programmed in romanticism as the genre of literature: the genericity, so to speak, and the generativity of literature, grasping and producing themselves in an entirely new, infinitely new Work. The *absolute*, therefore, of literature” (11). This is also the reason that in this citation, “*Poesie*” is translated as *literature* and not *poetry* as translated in the English version of the *Selected Writings*.

poetry is the unity of art or continuum of forms, it is understood as “one work” that is the “real ground of all empirical works” and which expresses “the highest universality as individuality” (SW 1: 167).

Being “one work,” the progressive universal poetry “proves the survival of the work,” for every individual work with its particular form is eventually transformed into the absolute form or the continuum of forms which lives on after the decline of the individual work. This implies an exceptional perspective of history and a concept of time closely related to the so-called “Romantic Messianism” (SW 1: 168); however, scholarly conventions of the time impeded Benjamin from directly discussing Messianism in his dissertation. Benjamin’s concern and his idea about the central role of Messianism in Romanticism are evident in the letter to Ernst Schoen written on April 7, 1919:

A few days ago I completed a rough draft of my dissertation. It has become what it was meant to be: a pointer to the true nature of romanticism, of which the secondary literature is completely ignorant—and even that only indirectly, because I was no more allowed to get to the heart of romanticism, i.e. messianism (I only dealt with its perception of art) than to anything else that I find very relevant. Had I attended to get to the heart of romanticism, I would have cut myself off from any chance of achieving the expected complicated and conventional scholarly attitude that I personally distinguish from the genuine one. But I hope to have achieved the following in this work: to deduce this state of affairs from the inside out. (COR: 139-140)

One possible approach to understanding the Romantic Messianism is to look at Benjamin’s concept of history as not being grounded in the modern notion of progress but in “an infinite process of fulfillment” (SW 1: 168). In his early essay, “The Life of Students,” written between approximately 1914 and 1915, Benjamin had already expressed his idea about the Messianic dimension of history:

There is a view of history that puts its faith in the infinite extent of time and thus concerns itself only with the speed, or lack of it, with which people and epochs advance along with the path of progress. . . . The following remarks, in contrast, delineate a

particular condition in which history appears to be concentrated in a single focal point, like those that have traditionally been found in the utopian images of the philosophers. The elements of the ultimate condition do not manifest themselves as formless progressive tendencies, but are deeply rooted in every present in the form of the most endangered, excoriated, and ridiculed ideas of products of the creative mind. The historical task is to disclose this immanent state of perfection and make it absolute, to make it visible and dominant in the present . . . , to grasp its metaphysical structure, as with the messianic domain or the idea of the French Revolution. (SW 1: 37)

The Messianic dimension of history does not understand time as an infinite flow with empty, “formless progressive tendencies.” Rather, it refers to an end of time fulfilled and “concentrated in a single focal point.” The progressive universal poetry wholly reflects this Messianic model because as one work and the continuum of forms “in the most determinate way” (SW 1: 168), it is a type of fulfillment comprising temporarily different stages of forms, resembling the singular focal point of concentration found in the Messianic sphere. Criticism of art thus becomes historically significant because it is comparable to the historical task meant to expose the “immanent state of perfection and make it absolute” as well as “visible and dominant in the present.” Because of this Messianic dimension, Schlegel calls art and criticism “divinatory” (SW 1: 166). This explains why Benjamin writes in the above-mentioned letter to Gershom Scholem that the “core” of the early Romanticism lies in “religion and history” (COR: 88).

With the Messianic dimension of history, the idea of art expressed in the progressive universal poetry suggests a “singular plurality of art” (Comay, 2004: 143) concentrated as “the imprint of the pure poetic absolute in the form itself” (SW 1: 171). In the view of the early German Romantics, the progressive universal poetry as manifesting the idea of art is founded on the form of prose which is the foundation for the “continuum of forms.” Therefore, it is necessary for a literary work to “acquire a prosaic look” (SW 1:174). Benjamin tries to explicate this notion by citing Novalis:

The simpler, more uniform, and calmer the movements of the sentences are here, the more harmonious their mixtures in the whole and the looser the connection, the more transparent and

colorless the expression—so much the more perfect is this indolent poetry in its seeming dependence on objects, and its contrast to all ornate prose. (SW 1: 174)

The “prosaic look” described is the “antithesis of ecstasy,” which Benjamin understands as “the sober,” a concept that he borrows from Hölderlin’s concept of the “‘holy-sober’ poetry” (SW 1: 175). This sobriety is attained by a practice comprising a procedure similar to that of craftsmanship, which requires “mechanical reason” (SW 1: 176) to be applied in the calculation and repetition of the fundamental elements of a literary work in the procedure of its production. As Hölderlin argues:

[M]odern poetry is especially lacking in a school and in the craftsmanlike, in the means whereby its procedures can be calcated and taught and, once learned, reliably repeated thereafter in practice. . . . For this reason and for even deeper reasons, poetry needs especially definite and characteristic principles and limits. To these now belongs just that lawful calculus. (SW 1: 176)

With such “mechanical reason” and “lawful calculus,” a literary work is constituted as the “center of reflection” which is the starting point for criticism of art to expose the idea of art founded on the form of prose. In this regard, the form of prose is there as a fundamental element or a literary material to be calculated and repeatedly used in making works of literature.

Accordingly, the form of prose is not only the essence inherent in a work of art, but it is also the basic criterion for criticism to determine whether a work is really a work of art. In this respect, Benjamin states in his dissertation that “if a work can be criticized, then it is a work of art; otherwise it is not” (SW 1: 160). Furthermore, he argues that the “final determination of the idea of art” (SW 1: 173) lies in prose, and thus, criticism is “the preparation (*Darstellung*) of the prosaic kernel in every work” (SW 1: 178). According to this argument, the criticizability indicates the essence of a work of art that lies in the form of prose which is to be exposed by criticism. Moreover, the word “preparation” may not be the exact translation of the German *Darstellung*, which means representation or exposition. However, it concisely describes a process analogous to a scientific experiment. Benjamin writes, “The concept of ‘preparation’ is understood in the chemical sense, as the generation of a substance through a determinate process to which other

substances are submitted” (SW 1: 178). This implies the aspects of materiality and objectivity in criticism of art as it is meant to expose the integration of the particular form of the individual artwork into the form of prose. This is practiced through the writing of prose, and hence prose as the “final determination of the idea of art” can be immediately cognized in criticism itself. In this sense, criticism is “a formation whose origin is occasioned by the work but whose continued existence is independent of it” (SW 1: 177). This indicates that criticism of art is not only the process of exposing “the prosaic kernel” in the artwork but also the product of this process, itself a work of art connected to the idea of art. Benjamin, therefore, believes that criticism of art “cannot be distinguished in principle from the work of art” (SW 1: 177). According to this viewpoint, the prosaic nature of the artwork is revealed by the fact that on the one hand, “criticism expresses itself in prose,” and on the other hand, the form of prose can be comprehended “through criticism’s object, which is the eternal sober continuance of the work” (SW 1: 178). In this sense, criticism of art arises from the writing of prose and, consequently, becomes the other of the artwork that is the immediate reflection of the idea of art determined in the form of prose.

V. Translation

Continuing the idea of his 1916 essay, which states that translation is meant to move all languages toward the pure language, Benjamin argues in his essay “The Task of the Translator” that translation is practiced to represent the pure language, in which “all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists” (SW 1: 257). This relationship between languages implies a special aspect of history that Benjamin discusses in his essay in terms of the continuity of life:

Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the living (*mit dem Lebendigen*) without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life as from its survival (*Überleben*). For a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of the “living-on” (*Fortleben*). (SW 1: 254; translation modified)

Translation is viewed as an expression of the original's life, which survives in translation. The original continues living after it has been translated in different periods of time. This implies that the original "has taken leave" and "is no longer present" (Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* 62), but it still lives on in the translation. As long as translations are being made in different periods of time, the original's life "attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding (*Entfaltung*)" (SW 1: 255).

The continued life or "living-on" of the original through translation is described as an unfolding, suggesting a process of change: "in its living-on—which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living—the original undergoes a change" (SW 1: 256). The essence of this change is the "after-ripening (*Nachreife*)" that is regarded as a "powerful and fruitful historical process" (SW 1: 256). This indicates the historical dimension of translation consisting in the process of growth and decline as part of the transformation of language, as described in the following passage:

For just as the tenor and the significance of the great works of literature undergo a complete transformation over the centuries, the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well. While a poet's words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language and eventually to perish with its renewal. Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that precisely its most specific task becomes that of calling attention to the after-ripening (*Nachreife*) of the alien word, as well as to the pangs of its own. (SW 1: 256; translation modified)

The historical process expressed in the after-ripening suggests the finite life of one language and its renewed growing and living in other languages. It is revealed by translation, which calls attention "to the after-ripening of the alien word" that has taken leave from its own. This diachronic relationship between "singularly dividual languages" (Weber, *Benjamin's-abilities* 69) in translation also grants them continuity through transformation. Therefore, translation does not simply provide a copy of the original, but rather it "serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one another" (SW 1: 155).

At this point, Benjamin argues that there is a distinction between “what is meant (*das Gemeinte*) and the way of meaning (*Art des Meinens*)” (SW 1: 257). In respect to “what is meant,” languages can be identical because they all mean the same things. What makes them different from one another is the way in which they express those meanings. The way of meaning entails the intention of languages, which is “supplemented in its relation to what is meant,” so that what is ultimately meant, the pure language, “emerges from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning” (SW 1: 257). On the one hand, the way of meaning indicates the differences within languages that translation puts in relation to one another; on the other hand, it implies that the kinship of all languages, which manifests in translation, consists in the pure language, which is the “totality of their intentions supplementing one another” (SW 1:257). According to these arguments, the relationship between the original and its translation is described as follows:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail form itself in its own language according to the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (SW 1: 260; translation modified)

Since the translation and original are “fragments of a greater language,” they are not related in terms of resemblance. Rather, their relationship is based on the mutual ground of the pure language, to which the intentions of both translation and original are directed as they supplement each other. Therefore, fidelity in translation is not determined by the “faithful reproduction of sense,” for translation forms itself “in its own language according to the original’s way of meaning” (SW 1: 259).

Articulated within a specific form of language with its own way of meaning, translation seeks “to regain the pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux” (SW 1: 261) within its own language. The question then concerns the form that translation must take in order to retrieve the pure language. Here, Benjamin suggests “literalness (*Wörtlichkeit*)” as the answer:

A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering (*Wörtlichkeit*) of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness (*Wörtlichkeit*) is the arcade. (SW 1: 260)

The “literal rendering of the syntax,” understood as “word-by-word syntax”, serves as the way of meaning in translation (Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* 74). What is written in translation is the “sequential arrangement of words” (Weber, *Benjamin’s -abilities* 75), which indicates that “what is meant is bound to the way of meaning of the individual word” (SW 1: 159-160). In translation, words are not arranged according to grammar, which is a fixed system based on tradition that structures sentences and their meanings. Rather, the literal rendering of the syntax “casts the reproduction of meaning entirely to the winds” so that translation can “refrain from wanting to communicate something” as well as “from rendering the sense” (SW 1: 260). It implies that the literalness expressing mere words has the qualities of immediacy and self-communication, which are the very characteristic of the pure language. By writing literalness, translation becomes transparent, as if it were the pure language that expresses itself through its own medium.

In this regard, the literal quality of words is closely related to the “translatability” which is an “essential feature” or an “essential quality” of a text or a work to be translated (SW 1: 254). The translatability is determined by its foundation in the literal quality of words that reveals the truth of language. In “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin writes:

Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly, without any mediating sense, in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionally translatable. To be sure, such translation no longer serves the cause of the text, but rather works in the interest of languages. (SW 1: 262)

In this context, the meaning of the direct partaking of the literal quality “in true language” is ambiguous. It alludes to God’s word, which is a theological-

spiritual connotation of the pure language as discussed in “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” However, the literal quality does not manifest the pure language in its original sense, for the pure language is now represented by the translation of literalness as a secularized manifestation that serves as “God’s remembrance” (SW 1: 254). Instead, the literal quality only reveals the presence of words that reflects the materiality of language as its truth. It serves as the profane and material ground for a work or a text to be translated. It is exactly this ground which the translatability in the secular present is based upon. In this sense, translation that writes literalness presents itself as a profane form to commemorate God’s word, the pure language, and to express the translatability that indicates the truth of language in its materiality.

IV. Conclusion

In their specific forms, criticism of art and translation expose the criticizability and the translatability which are essential for works of art and language. In the meantime, they also manifest the more general and higher sphere of knowledge immediately mediated by the art and the pure language as media by reorganizing artworks or by rearranging languages. However, criticism of art and translation do not reproduce the art and the pure language in their original sense, but “effect a movement from the original to a plain that is once more and less than the original” (Pfau 1085). This means that criticism of art and translation do not attain the more general and higher sphere, although they are meant to represent the interconnection between artworks and the totality of languages.

In Benjamin’s early writings, art is defined in terms of language, as read in his essay “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man”:

There is a language of sculpture, of painting, of poetry. Just as the language of poetry is partly, if not solely, founded on the name language of man, it is very conceivable that the language of sculpture or painting is founded on certain kinds of thing-languages, that in them we find a translation of the language of things into an infinitely higher language, which may still be of the same sphere. We are concerned here with nameless, nonacoustic languages, languages issuing from matter; here we should recall

the material community of things in their communication. (SW 1: 73)

As individual artistic forms are “founded on certain kinds of thing-languages,” they exist to be translated into “an infinitely higher language” in art. In this instance, art represents “thing-languages” that can only express their “material community” as they communicate. This concept reflects that the language of things is nameless, speechless, and “issuing from matter” because, as previously discussed herein, things are named by man, but after the Fall, the language of man cannot translate things into the name-language, the pure language. Art as the “infinitely higher language” does not refer to the higher instance of the pure language; on the contrary, it remains in the sphere of profane linguistic materiality. Being defined as such, art seems to anticipate translation as writing literalness in which the truth of language in its materiality is expressed.

Indeed, in “The Task of the Translator,” Benjamin sees in translation a literary-aesthetic aspect because he posits that translation is the “highest testimony” of the Romantic poetics, especially regarding criticism:

They (the Romantics), more than any others, were gifted with an insight into the life of literary works—an insight for which translation provides the highest testimony. To be sure, they hardly recognized translation in this sense, but devoted their entire attention to criticism—another, if lesser, factor in the continued life of literary works. But even though the Romantics virtually ignored translation in their theoretical writings, their own great translations testify to their sense of the essential nature and the dignity of this literary mode. (SW 1: 258)

At the expense of translation, the Romantics preferred criticism to reveal the idea of art. Nevertheless, Benjamin believes that translation shows exactly the sense of the “literary mode” that criticism is meant to represent, namely the form of prose. Translation seems to be “a metaphor for criticism,” as Carol Jacobs posits it in her essay “The Monstrosity of Translation,” in which she argues that “foreign meanings” are acquired when “Benjamin speaks of ‘translation’” (86). However, Jacobs does not provide more detailed arguments for her postulation and ignores the more essential point: that criticism and translation are realized as a type of writing concerning the

profane and material grounds of language and, thus, they indicate indirectly the ineffability of the pure language due to its absence. This ineffability is implied by the literalness in translation that represents the pure language, as defined in “The Task of the Translator” as the “expressionless and creative Word,” in which “all languages—all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished” (SW 1: 261). Not in the dissertation, but in “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” another important essay in his early writings, Benjamin uses the term “the expressionless” to represent a “category of language and art” as well as a “critical violence which, while unable to separate semblance from essence in art, prevents them from mingling” (SW 1: 340). In this regard, criticism of art forms itself in prose as the expressionless to manifest the essence, the form of prose, in art. Again, Benjamin refers to the words of Hölderlin in “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” as he defines the expressionless as “the pure word,” in which “every expression simultaneously comes to a standstill, in order to give free reign to an expressionless power inside all artistic media” (SW 1: 340-341). The “pure word” in criticism of art and the literalness as the “expressionless and creative Word” in translation do not express any content but mere existence presented with linguistic materiality.

In terms of the expressionless, criticism of art, like translation, also reflects the literal quality while manifesting the form of prose as the essence in art. Translation and criticism of art present the word without expression by writing literalness and by arising from the writing of prose, respectively. They are the type of writing that embodies the materiality of language in the objective and prosaic-poetic form that not only exposes the essential quality and feature in works of art and language, namely the criticizability and the translatability, but also marks the loss, the ineffability, of the pure language in the secular present. However, it is not necessary to regard them as tasks doomed to be given up, as understood by Paul de Man (80). Instead, translation and criticism of art represent the objective and prosaic-poetic form of writing that can be regarded as a cultural and literary attempt to create the profane medium with which the ineffable, the pure language, can be conceived through reading. In terms of effect, they produce what Benjamin in his dissertation calls the “mediated immediacy” (SW 1: 126) to illustrate the immediate mediation of the absolute knowledge and the self-knowledge from the pure language and art as media. In this sense, translation and criticism of art exemplify what Benjamin describes in his letter to Martin Buber on July 17, 1916: the form of the “crystal-pure elimination of the ineffable in

language” that coincides with “the objective and dispassionate manner of writing” (COR: 80). As such a form of writing, translation and criticism of art can be regarded as the proper vehicle to express Benjamin’s understanding of objective-poetic writing.

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