

Proust and Kafka's Modernist Afterlives

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This year marks the centenary of Walter Benjamin's seminal essay on 'The Task of the Translator', which introduced the influential concept of the 'afterlife' of a literary text in translation. Yet closer reading reveals 'afterlife' as a productive mistranslation of what Benjamin calls 'Fortleben' (literally 'living forth'), a term lacking any sense of the mortality or decay suggested by the English 'afterlife'. Returning to and departing from the original essay, this talk will explore what the language of translation (and translation studies) can tell us about other things. It will examine this decade's ongoing obsession with modernist centenaries to consider what forms of modernism precede a modernist 'afterlife', and what theories of 'afterlife' might enable a finer description of the ongoing legacy of modernism in the twenty-first century. Carol Jacobs has noted that 'it is an error to search Benjamin's work for stability in terminology', but this is precisely why Benjamin's consistent use of the term 'Fortleben' is so significant. This talk interrogates what implications it might have for thinking about the posterity of modernist authors, particularly those like Proust and Kafka whose later work is itself preoccupied with questions of posterity, in the present age of global literary circulation and translation.

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