

The Time of Translation

Walter Benjamin's *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*

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The connoisseur of wine understands
the exquisiteness of Spätlese¹

Walter Benjamin's preface to his own translation of Charles Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, published in 1923 and entitled *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* can well be regarded as one of the most difficult and dense treatises on translation. Even the most modest attempt at understanding, interpreting or even rewording this text should be doomed to fail as it succeeds a number of eminent translators and thinkers who have displayed the amount of difficulties they had encountered. Jacques Derrida explicitly admits to such difficulties when presenting the reason for his choice of text as a detour; instead of reading Benjamin's *Sur le langage en général et sur le langage humain* he chooses this text on translation:

Mais devant le caractère à mes yeux trop énigmatique de cet essai, sa richesse et ses surdéterminations, j'ai dû ajourner cette lecture et m'en tenir à *La tâche du traducteur*. Sa difficulté n'est sans doute pas moindre, mais son unité reste plus apparente, mieux centrée autour de son thème.²

While Derrida considers both of Benjamin's texts as similar in richness and overdetermination, he points out an advantage in the second text's unity and thematic concentration. In spite of this unity and concentration Derrida, however, approaches this text in a detour, that is not only the structure of his own text, the deconstruction of the Biblical myth of the Tower of Babel, but also the underlying pun of his article's title: *Des tours de Babel*. This is of course in itself a metaphor of Derrida's deconstructive reading.

Paul de Man, too, uses a detour in his approach of Benjamin's text on translation: he embeds it in a critique of Gadamer's *Aspekte der Modernität*. While the title of his presentation comes right to the point: *Conclusions*:

Walter Benjamin's "*The Task of the Translator*", his introduction surprises by a certain reluctance if not annoyance. His choice of this text is not guided by its challenging difficulties but rather by its popularity in academic discourse: "in the sense that in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text".³ He then declares straightforwardly his procedure and the outcome of his analysis:

I want to stay pretty close to this particular text, and see what comes out. If I say stay close to the text, since it is a text on translation, I will need – and that is why I have all these books – translations of this text, because if you have a text which says it is impossible to translate, it is very nice to see what happens when that text gets translated. And the translations confirm, brilliantly, beyond any expectations which I may have had, that it is impossible to translate, as you will see in a moment.⁴

This conclusion of course is provocative because Benjamin's treatise on translation is the foreword to his own translation of Baudelaire's poetry. Should Benjamin have thought of his own translation as failure? Why then did he publish it? If translation is failure, why did he endeavor to fail? And what is the function of the foreword and its relationship to the following translation of poetry: apologetic, self-critical, didactic or deconstructive? But de Man's conclusion has yet another provocative side to it: he goes to great lengths to show the mistakes and misunderstandings of the translators and interpreters of this text, and in criticizing these he comes up with his own true?, better?, correct? close reading. Is translation really impossible? Or are some literary scholars simply better? With great irony, if not to say sarcasm, de Man proceeds to weed out the well-versed translations of the famous English translator Harry Zohn and the equally famous French professor of philosophy Maurice de Gandillac:

We now then ask the simplest, the most naïve, the most literal of possible questions in relation to Benjamin's text, and we will not get beyond that: what does Benjamin say? What does he say, in the most immediate sense possible? It seems absurd to ask a question that is so simple, that seems to be so unnecessary [...]. Even the translators [...] don't seem to have the slightest idea of what Benjamin is saying; so much so that when Benjamin says certain things rather simply in one way – for example he says that something is *not* – the translators, who at least know German

well enough to know the difference between something *is* and something *is not*, don't see it!⁵

De Man is so furious of these many mistranslations that he can hardly stop himself from adding yet another and another bad example. One that of course added fuel to the flames of his irritation is a rather central idea in Benjamin: "Wo der Text unmittelbar, ohne vermittelnden Sinn [...] der Wahrheit oder der Lehre angehört, ist er übersetzbar schlechthin"⁶. De Man accepts the English translation, that such a text can be translated „schlechthin“ – "without further ado", but he is indignant at Gandillac's version, that renders such a text "intraduisible" – "untranslatable" and goes on:

What adds some comedy to this particular instance is that Jacques Derrida was doing a seminar with this particular text in Paris, using the French – Derrida's German is pretty good, but he prefers to use the French [...]. So Derrida was basing part of his reading on the "intraduisible", on the untranslatability, until somebody in his seminar (so I'm told) pointed out to him that the correct word was "translatable". I'm sure that Derrida could explain that it was the same . . . and I mean that in a positive sense, it *is* the same, but still, it is not the same without some additional explanation.⁷

Why on earth should a philosopher as great as Derrida base a close-reading argument on a translation without ever making sure that that translation's contents is equivalent to that of the original? In the published version of *Des tours de Babel* Derrida has deleted that mistake, but not his preference of the French translation even though his argumentation reveals that he is well aware of the German original. He even stresses the fact that he is using the French translation: "[J]e traduis, je traduis la traduction par Maurice de Gandillac d'un texte de Benjamin, qui préfaçant une traduction, en prend prétexte pour dire à quoi et en quoi tout traducteur est engagé – et note au passage, pièce essentielle de sa démonstration, qu'il ne saurait y avoir de traduction de la traduction"⁸. It is yet another detour. Instead of dealing solely, directly with the German original, Derrida inserts the French translation. But more than that, he describes his own procedure, his interpreting, philosophizing as "translating", even though he is writing in French on a French translation and even though he is well aware that the argument of the original denounces the possibility of a translation of a

translation. Paul de Man's argument, too, displays the turn of the screw: translatable and untranslatable *is* the same. And now we come to see why this text is so difficult to understand. Walter Benjamin's argumentation is so complicated, surprisingly twisted, ambivalent in its use of pronouns as well as of words and metaphors that one may very well think at first sight that this text on translation is itself – in the traditional sense of translation – untranslatable.

Nirgends erweist sich einem Kunstwerk oder einer Kunstform gegenüber die Rücksicht auf den Aufnehmenden für deren Erkenntnis fruchtbar. [...] Denn kein Gedicht gilt dem Leser, kein Bild dem Beschauer, keine Symphonie der Hörerschaft.⁹

The very first sentence of Benjamin's treatise on translation states that art, no matter which media, is never meant for a recipient. It seems like a slap in the face of the reader who has just bothered to get hold of this translation of poems by Charles Baudelaire. And Benjamin continues with the next apodictic statement, no less devastating: A translation is not meant for readers who are unable to understand the original. For how could a translation repeat what poetry itself does not tell?

Gilt eine Übersetzung den Lesern, die das Original nicht verstehen? Das scheint hinreichend den Rangunterschied im Bereich der Kunst zwischen beiden zu erklären. Überdies scheint es der einzig mögliche Grund, „Dasselbe“ wiederholt zu sagen. Was „sagt“ denn eine Dichtung? Was teilt sie mit? Sehr wenig dem, der sie versteht. Ihr Wesentliches ist nicht Mitteilung, nicht Aussage.¹⁰

Therefore, only bad translations of poetry endeavor to communicate a message. And only bad translations offer their readers a poetic substitute, a poem that is supposed to replace the original in order to repeat what it has said. Walter Benjamin begins his comments on translation by saying what it is not, he then mentions two bad examples and only after that does he arrive at his first positive statement, which again is somewhat unexpected: "Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen"¹¹. Translation is form, a form due to the original, a form determined by the translatability of the original itself, which

does not only mean that the original will suffer a translation, but rather that it demands one. And this demand, this essential characteristic of the original is independent of the existence of an adequate translator. There is a direct close relationship between the original and the translation governed by the law of translatability of the former.

This short summary of the introductory first page of Benjamin's treatise on translation should suffice to show how difficult it is to read this text, and to give the impression of an underlying resistance of this text to understanding, and in that sense to translating. If we now return to the title of the text, "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", we become painfully aware that it is impossible to translate. It is impossible to translate if translation means to render the exact and total meaning of words. "Übersetzer" may not pose such a problem. It is at least tentatively well defined as a profession. Of course it will change its meaning in accordance with the definition of the underlying "translation", but that is the subject of the text. The German word "Aufgabe", derived from a verb "aufgeben" has so many different meanings that the choice of the translation – and usually there is only one choice – changes substantially the meaning of the text. The two famous French and English translators have chosen the word "tâche"/"task". Which seems to be the most obvious choice. Derrida gives in his text a concise presentation of the range of meaning that is involved in "Aufgabe" and that corresponds to the intricate relationship that binds the translator to the original:

Parmi les mots qui répondent au titre de Benjamin (*Aufgabe*, le devoir, la mission, la tâche, le problème, ce qui est assigné, donné à faire, donné à rendre), c'est dès le début *Wiedergabe*, *Sinnwiedergabe*, la restitution, la restitution du sens. [...] Quant à *aufgeben*, c'est aussi donner, expédier (émission, mission) et abandonner.¹²

The most frequent use of the word „Aufgabe“ in German is indeed reflected in the English words „task“, „assignment“, „mission“, it is something someone was given in order to accomplish and to return. In that sense it is the task of the translator to fulfill and return what he has received: to translate. There is also the meaning of "expédier" / "to post", meaning that something is sent to someone else, and therefore postponed and displaced, and again "translated", as we will see soon.¹³ And finally there is a very different meaning – in German in this sense the verb is more commonly used

than the noun – which Derrida substitutes by “abandonner” and which can be translated into English as “to abandon”, “to forsake”, and also “to resign”, “to throw in the towel”. In that sense “die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” has two more meanings: one saying that the translator is giving up his task, and therefore failing and in doing so aware of his failing, that he has decided to fail, the other saying that he is not the agent of translation at all but himself an object: he is forsaken by someone else. That is of course the doings of the ambivalent function of the genitive, which at the same time declares and disguises the relationship it governs. So there are at least three possibilities of translating the title of Benjamin’s treatise into English: “The Task of the Translator” – which of course is the most discursive, it is the one you would expect and it is the one given by Zohn and Gandillac – , “The resignation of the Translator”, and “Forsaking the Translator”. Because of this richness of meaning I refrain from translating Benjamin’s *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* or Derrida’s *Des tours de Babel* or de Man’s *Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”*.

The last of the three versions of translating is the one that Carol Jacobs prefers when she argues that in Benjamin’s text the translator is being abandoned, that die “Aufgabe” des Übersetzers makes more sense understood as his capitulation than as his task. According to her the introduction of “translatability” does away with the necessity of any translating subject right from the start. The intricate relationship of original and translation has no need for a translator, and that fact makes Benjamin’s concept of translation to her so “monstrous”. In her interpretation: what remains from the beginning to the end of the text is only this monstrosity and irony.¹⁴ However, her main arguments are not so convincing. Neither is Walter Benjamin known for writing ironic texts – that is, apart from Romantic irony, which of course is some trademark of his, but which indeed is a most humane kind of irony – nor can the final, the ultimate example of Benjamin’s text: the translation of the Holy Bible be regarded as ironic. In Benjamin’s categorization of originals there are two kinds demanding translation: there are the Holy Texts which are “schlechthin”, without further ado, translatable, if translated as an interlineary version, which is the “Urbild” and “Ideal” of all translation. This makes perfectly sense if a Holy Text is a Holy Text – then it has no significance, because there is no gap between the signifier and the signified. And there is poetry which demands, which calls for, which prompts translation by the law of translatability. This

she calls “monstrous”, without really explaining what it is. On this the article in hand would like to shed some light. But before doing so, we shall have to return to our semantic analysis of the title “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”.

Let us now turn to the word “translation” (and “Übersetzung”) which seems to be at the center of deconstructionist punning: de Man’s statement that translatable and untranslatable is the same, and Derrida describing his own procedure as translation (from French to French). Both are of course aware of the richness of meaning and the historicity of words. “Translation” is a Latin word and used to mean a lot more than is meant when we use it today. “translatio” is a compound word of “trans”, meaning “over”, “beyond”, and “latio”, a noun formed from the participle of the Latin verb “to carry”. The German “Übersetzung” is quite similar: “über”, meaning “over”, and “Setzung”, a noun formed from the verb “setzen” (“to set”). It has two meanings, which are differentiated by a shift of accent: “übersétzen” meaning “to translate”, and “úbersetzen” meaning “to cross a river”, “to ferry”. “Translatio” has in classical and post-classical Latin a number of meanings reflecting this basic idea of carrying something over to another place, fairly similar to the usage of today’s word “to transfer” power, troops, goods etc. In the domain of language it was used to describe a change in word order long before it adopted the historically fairly late meaning of today’s translation from one language to another. In addition, it was used in rhetorics as the Latin equivalent of the Greek “tropos” and “metaphora”.

And this of course is the source of the deconstructionist approach of “translation”. In everyday speech today we expect “translation” to mean – if possible – a perfect substitution of words from one language to another without any loss of meaning – an idea that is so commonplace and beyond suspicion that we frequently use translated material even in academic research. However, the historical rhetorical debt of the word “translation” belies all good intentions. For the meaning of “tropos” is “turning”, and in rhetorics its function is exactly the opposite of a substitution of identical words, instead it refers to a replacement of the original word by another word that exceeds the first word’s literal meaning and rhetorical effect, in fact, it may very well mean the opposite of that first word. “Metaphora” is often used interchangeably with “tropos” and in any case it is considered as the outstanding example of “tropoi”. De Man points out its relationship to “Übersetzung” in his attempt to clarify the connection between original and

translation:

[T]he translation does not resemble the original the way the child resembles the parent, nor is it an imitation, a copy, or a paraphrase of the original. In that sense, since they are not resemblances, since they are not imitations, one would be tempted to say they are not metaphors. The translation is not the metaphor of the original; nevertheless, the German word for translation, *übersetzen*, means metaphor. *Übersetzen* translates exactly the Greek *metaphorein*, to move over, *übersetzen*, to put across. *Übersetzen*, I should say, *translates* metaphor – which, asserts Benjamin, is not at all the same. They are not metaphors, yet the word means metaphor. The metaphor is not a metaphor, Benjamin is saying. No wonder that translators have difficulty.¹⁵

De Man follows Benjamin in his stunning argument that there is no resemblance between the original and the translation, no resemblance whatsoever: The translation is neither a mere copy, a comparable imitation, both of which have a surface likeness, nor a paraphrase or even a child, which suggest an inner similarity, if not identity, in a different shape. For that very reason the translation should not be a metaphor because metaphor is the tropos of resemblance. Nevertheless, the German “Übersetzen” translates into “metaphor”, as well as “translatio”. There seems to be at the core of *Übersetzung*, *translatio*, a deeper insight into the fact that a word replacing another word can never be the identical word, no matter how similar they may seem at first sight, not even if it is the same word, as so many tropoi as well as Gertrude Stein aptly demonstrate: a rose is a rose. Benjamin’s example is “pain et vin”, which can never translate adequately into the German “Brot und Wein”, or the English “bread and wine”. What comes to mind is an ancient Greek quotation, that you can never enter the same river twice, which seems to be valid for its crossing as well. Once you have crossed over, translated, you have displaced the original word.

When Jacques Derrida uses the word “translation” for his interpretation of *La tâche du traducteur* (the French version) and his philosophizing on the significance of translation, he takes this broader meaning into account. Neither does he forget the more general meaning of transferring something, and in so doing displacing and postponing it. We can now see that the term “translation” – after its metamorphosis from everyday

speech – is a capable metaphor of Derrida's famous concept of "différance": the floating of the signifier over the chain of signification.¹⁶ Having this concept in mind it is clear why Derrida insists on "translating a translation", in spite of Benjamin: the only possibility not to translate is an attempt at willful clôtüre. Since Derrida is aware of the fact, that he can never, no matter how hard he tried, reach the meaning and render the meaning of the original without misunderstanding, without mistranslating, he may as well use the French translation as an intermediary – that cannot be but treacherous – in order to render what he has received. This intermediary then does not function as a true copy of the original but rather as a catalyst of meaning, as the anecdote provided by Paul de Man aptly demonstrates: when Derrida reads, translatable and untranslatable *is* the same.

But in Walter Benjamin's text there seems to be a strong and direct link between the original and the translation in spite of everything: the law of translatability. Yet this is, as we have seen, neither a metaphor of an inner or outer resemblance of original and translation, nor a metaphor of a true meaning that links the two of them. And yet translation has no mere secondary didactic purpose. For Benjamin that connection seems quite obvious and neither de Man nor Derrida disagree: "Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original"¹⁷. It is a temporary structure that links the translation to the original: posteriority. It is not the tropos of metaphor that governs the relationship of original and translation, but rather the tropos of metonymy: original and translation are attached to one another in time. There cannot be a translation without an original, yet there can be an original without a translation, because translatability is an essential characteristic of the original independent of the realization of translation. And in the sense that translation postpones and displaces, it, too, turns from metaphor into metonymy. But in order to explain "translation" and its relationship to the original Benjamin uses metaphors, not a few and not very straightforward metaphors. This is what Paul de Man implied, when he argued that Benjamin's metaphor is not a metaphor. So, now let us have a look at these abundant, difficult and twisted metaphors, whose purpose is to explain the concept of translatability, to explain this temporary structure.

Übersetzbarkeit eignet gewissen Werken wesentlich [...]. Daß eine Übersetzung niemals, so gut sie auch sei, etwas für das Original zu bedeuten vermag, leuchtet ein. Dennoch steht sie mit diesem kraft seiner

Übersetzbarkeit im nächsten Zusammenhang. Ja, dieser Zusammenhang ist um so inniger, als er für das Original selbst nichts mehr bedeutet. Er darf ein natürlicher genannt werden und zwar genauer ein Zusammenhang des Lebens. So wie die Äußerungen des Lebens innigst mit dem Lebendigen zusammenhängen, ohne ihm etwas zu bedeuten, geht die Übersetzung aus dem Original hervor. Zwar nicht aus seinem Leben so sehr denn aus seinem „Überleben“. Ist doch die Übersetzung später als das Original und bezeichnet sie doch bei den bedeutenden Werken, die da ihre erwählten Übersetzer niemals im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung finden, das Stadium ihres Fortlebens. In völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit ist der Gedanke vom Leben und Fortleben der Kunstwerke zu erfassen.¹⁸

This passage is so difficult and rich in meaning that again any translation seems impossible. The most careful interpretation should say that here Benjamin compares the relationship of original and translation to life and its expressions. But he insists that this should be understood in a most unmetaphorical matter-of-fact way. Derrida and de Man both agree that this comparison is not meant as a starting point of any kind of transcendental or messianic interpretation, which is quite common in Benjamin, but seems to be left out of account on this occasion. Benjamin insists that this relationship should be considered natural. What makes the passage so difficult is his gradual replacement of the word “life” (Leben) by “Überleben” and “Fortleben”, the translation of which becomes the turning point of any interpretation. There are three ways which emerge: if you follow de Man you will face death, if you go with Derrida you will end up in marriage and with child, and if you come with me – you will see for yourself.

De Man, who is usually so circumspect when it comes to translations and interpretations, surprises by the swift gesture with which he here confers meaning:

[A]nother word that Benjamin constantly uses [is] the word *überleben*, to live beyond your own death in a sense. The translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus assuming and confirming the death of the original. [...] The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life,

but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original.¹⁹

His translation of “Überleben” is somewhat strange: “to live beyond your own death in a sense”, which may be triggered off by Benjamin putting the word into inverted commas in the first place. However his rendering of “Fortleben” is rather straightforward: afterlife. Both interpretations lead to the assumption that the original is dead, a statement that cannot be found at all in Benjamin. Benjamin does not use the word “dead” in this context at all. “Überleben” and “Fortleben” carry in German various meanings, and Benjamin stresses the diversity and significance of these meanings by introducing the first word in inverted commas. Although verbs, both words are in this passage used as nouns, as an abstract state of being. Ordinarily, “Überleben” would be translated as “survival”, that is: to live on and escape death. So if there is “Überleben” in the original, it does survive. It survives in the translation, or as the translation. Which does make sense. In that sense it outlives itself (in German again: “überleben”) – a verb that in English as well as in German is usually used in comparisons of at least two subjects: to outlive someone else. Used with only one subject it calls to attention yet another meaning of “überleben” (as a reflexive verb): to “overlive (oneself)” – comparable to the similar English verb structure “to overwork oneself”. In that sense the state of “Überleben” would have become inferior to that of “Leben”.

“Fortleben”, however does not translate into “afterlife” at all. The English “afterlife” has no German equivalent, it needs instead paraphrasing as “Leben nach dem Tod” (life after death) – which in itself is very interesting. “Fortleben” means literally: to continue to live, to live on. If the prefix is doubled (e.g.: sie lebte fort und fort) this meaning becomes somewhat weary, as if there is no end in sight. The only connection that “Fortleben” has to death and afterlife is in fact in its metaphorical use of a living memory of one’s beloved dead²⁰. Benjamin’s metonymic replacement of “Überleben” by “Fortleben” stresses again the fact that this is about continuance. The “Fortleben” serves to take away any metaphorical residue that may have remained attached to the meaning of “Überleben”: Die Übersetzung bezeichnet das Stadium des Fortlebens des Originals in völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit. Neither the “Überleben” nor the “Fortleben” have any metaphorical meaning whatsoever, the relationship of translation and

original is purely metonymic. If the original were to be dead, this relationship would be not only metaphorical but also transcendental. But, as Paul de Man rightly put it elsewhere, Benjamin's metaphor is not a metaphor.

And how does Derrida understand this comparison? His translator, Gandillac, remains much closer to the German original: He translates both "Überleben" and "Fortleben" as "survie", adding an explanation in brackets to the second word: "[*Fortleben*, cette fois la survie comme continuation de la vie plutôt que comme vie *post mortem*]"²¹, excluding expressively the meaning chosen by Paul de Man. Derrida discovers that Benjamin's text "circule sans cesse entre les valeurs de semence, de vie et surtout de 'survie' (*Überleben* a ici un rapport essentiel avec *Übersetzen*)"²². This combination of life, survival, and seed (taken from another of Benjamin's metaphors) will become essential to his interpretation. Again including the broken parts of another metaphor of Benjamin he unfolds his own metaphor of a marriage of the translation to the original:

Une traduction épouse l'original quand les deux fragments ajointés, aussi différents que possible, se complètent pour former une langue plus grande, au cours d'une survie qui les change tous les deux. Car la langue maternelle du traducteur, nous l'avons noté, s'y altère également. Telle est du moins mon interprétation – ma traduction, ma "tâche du traducteur". C'est ce que j'ai appelé le contrat de traduction: hymen ou contrat de mariage avec promesse d'inventer un enfant dont la semence donnera lieu à histoire et croissance. Contrat de mariage comme séminaire. Benjamin le dit, dans la traduction l'original grandit, il croît plutôt qu'il ne se reproduit – et j'ajouterai comme un enfant, le sien sans doute mais avec la force de parler tout seul qui fait d'un enfant autre chose qu'un produit assujetti à la loi de la reproduction.²³

It is a rather discursive, if not to say stereotype idea, that Derrida unfolds: the marriage of translation and original. But note the twisting of the metaphor: it is not the translator who marries metaphorically the author – which of course in Derrida's way of thinking would turn out to be a homosexual alliance (he doesn't know any noteworthy female authors) – it is the translation itself, which/who marries the original and they produce a child, a promised child, that will continue the genealogy, being able to speak on its own. Which leaves us to think that there are two dimensions of the

translation, the parent (mother?, father?) and the child. He is, of course, well aware that this is his interpretation, his translation (Gandillac's?, Derrida's?), he says it explicitly, but at the same time appealing to Benjamin as an authority: "Benjamin le dit, l'original grandit". Which Benjamin did not. Because in German there is only one word for the two French words "grandir" (the growing of a child) and "croître" (growing in general). And as a matter of fact there is no child at all in Benjamin's text. The French "croître" however is linked to "croissance" as well as "croissant", which both may literally as well as mythically allude to pregnancy. A connotation that is difficult to find in the German. But there is more: Derrida likes to indulge in his idea of marriage, of the importance of the hymen for the relationship of translation and original. He continues his own thoughts on "hymen" and "wedding dress"²⁴:

Le toujours intact, l'intangible, l'intouchable (*unberührbar*), c'est ce qui fascine et oriente le travail du traducteur. Il veut toucher à l'intouchable, à ce qui reste du texte quand on en a extrait le sens communicable (point de contact, on s'en souvient, infiniment petit), quand on a transmis ce qui ce peut transmettre, voire enseigner: ce que je fais ici, après et grâce à Maurice de Gandillac, sachant qu'un reste intouchable du texte benjaminien restera, lui aussi, intact au terme de l'opération. Intact et vierge malgré le labeur de la traduction, et si efficiente, si pertinente, qu'elle soit. Ici la pertinence ne touche pas. Si on peut risquer une proposition en apparence aussi absurde, le texte sera encore plus vierge après le passage du traducteur, et l'hymen, signe de virginité, plus jaloux de lui-même après l'autre hymen, le contrat passé et la consommation du mariage.²⁵

Now we know who this translator is, this translator that can only be male („[C]'est [la tâche] du traducteur et non de la traduction (ni d'ailleurs, soit dit au passage et la question n'est pas négligeable, de la traductrice)²⁶), who announces and passes through the virgin, procreating a child, but leaving the virgin intact, making her even more virginal and virtuous, there is only the ONE: The Holy Spirit – the great translator, Derrida himself. And the original? Dead with Paul de Man, a Holy Virgin with Derrida. We are, by the way, back to the translator, whom Benjamin perhaps has long renounced. Derrida is aware of that, how much he strayed, détours de Babel:

J'ai donc pensé à une robe de mariage. Benjamin ne pousse pas les choses dans le sens où je les traduis moi-même, le lisant toujours déjà en traduction. J'ai pris quelque liberté avec le teneur de l'original, autant qu'avec sa langue, et encore avec l'original qu'est aussi pour moi, maintenant, la traduction française. J'ai ajouté un manteau à l'autre, ça flotte encore, mais n'est-ce pas la destination de toute traduction? Si du moins une traduction se destinait à arriver.²⁷

There we are again: passing over to the other side (flotter), translating, if there is ever a chance to reach one's destination. *Des tours Babel*: Derrida's treatise on translation has quite a different point of departure from Benjamin's. It is the contract of the Judeo-Christian god with mankind, it is his wrath at the tower of Babel, that disperses man and his language, creating the many and misunderstanding and prompting, for that reason, translation, la différance. From then on a contract is needed, a contract on translation which is different from property and reproduction. Starting with the plurality of languages Derrida's text ends – quite practically – with the contracts that are needed to come to terms. In his approach to translation there will always be at least two parties involved. Those two parties, Derrida finds them again in another of Benjamin's metaphors:

Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen.²⁸

Here both, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, are reminded of a symbolon, which de Man describes as “the matching of two pieces or two fragments”²⁹, whose broken sides are put together so as to form the earlier intact shape as a token of recognition. In Benjamin, however, this does not lead to any intact and whole piece. The vessel remains broken. But the broken pieces, following one another metonymically, hint at the vessel, which refers to a greater language, greater than the broken pieces. For Derrida these broken parts evoke the two parties of the wedding, who are together reconstituting something new: “le nouvel ensemble plus vaste doit encore *reconstituer*

quelque chose"³⁰. There is in fact this unexpected singular in the German original: *two* broken pieces as one broken piece of a vessel, which may support Derrida's imagery. He may also see some confirmation of his interpretation in "ce mouvement d'amour, le geste de cet aimant (*liebend*)"³¹. Indeed, there is this "*liebend*" in Benjamin's text, but it does not need to be a lover's gesture. And actually Benjamin's image does not give the exact number of broken pieces. Are there only these two? Or are these two among many others? The German could tend to the second version ("ein Bruchstück" meaning a part *only* of something bigger), yet the ambiguity remains. In any case the vessel was broken. And even repaired it will show the scars of this mishap, the scars of life.

In order to explain why a translation cannot be translated again, why there remains in every translation an untranslatable essential core, Benjamin introduces another comparison:

[Die Übersetzung] ist nicht übertragbar wie das Dichterwort des Originals, weil das Verhältnis des Gehalts zur Sprache völlig verschieden ist in Original und Übersetzung. Bilden nämlich diese im ersten eine gewisse Einheit wie Frucht und Schale, so umgibt die Sprache der Übersetzung ihren Gehalt wie ein Königsmantel in weiten Falten. Denn sie bedeutet eine höhere Sprache als sie ist und bleibt dadurch ihrem eigenen Gehalt gegenüber unangemessen, gewaltig und fremd.³²

In the comparison of the pieces of a broken vessel Benjamin took great pains to stress the importance of the dissimilarity of those pieces. The structure that binds the two, translation and original, is not one of resemblance but one of metonymy. They are only joined together. In this comparison now he explains the essential dissimilarity of the original and its translation. The original has a certain unity of form and contents which Benjamin compares to the unity of a fruit and its skin, whereas the translation lacks this unity because it refers to a "higher language" and therefore keeps its distance towards its own contents. The image here is a king's robe with splendidly waving pleats. This difference of original and translation is due to a difference in approach or intention, as Benjamin puts it. He regards the original's use of language as "naïve, primary, vivid" because the original wants to express life, experience. Contrary to this, the translation is a derivation, its use of language is "secondary, ideal": "Damit ist allerdings zugestanden, daß

alle Übersetzung nur eine irgendwie vorläufige Art ist, sich mit der Fremdheit der Sprachen auseinanderzusetzen⁴³³. Translation is an attempt at grappling a foreign language, a chance to become aware of the difference in language as such – this is its gain, not its shortcomings. Because it enables the translation to reach another dimension of language, which however is not transcendental. Thus it is not similarity, but rather dissimilarity that is important in the relationship of original and translation. But if dissimilarity is important any rewording of the original would be valid. Then one could even argue that the further the distance is between form and contents in the translation the higher the quality of the translation, independent of any relationship to the original. Which would be absurd. Instead, there remains the translatability of the original, its metonymic relationship with the translation. As Benjamin puts it in another metaphor: the translation enables an echo of the original, its metonymic position is predetermined to one of those exact points in space, which allow the echo – yet another metaphor of metonymy. This leads us to the final, the ultimate metaphor in Benjamin's text:

So ist [...] erweisbar, daß keine Übersetzung möglich wäre, wenn sie Ähnlichkeit mit dem Original ihrem letzten Wesen nach anstreben würde. Denn in seinem Fortleben, daß so nicht heißen dürfte, wenn es nicht Wandlung und Erneuerung des Lebendigen wäre, ändert sich das Original. Es gibt eine Nachreife auch der festgelegten Worte. [...] Das Wesentliche solcher Wandlungen [...] in der Subjektivität der Nachgeborenen statt im eigensten Leben der Sprache und ihrer Werke zu suchen, hieße [...] einen der gewaltigsten und fruchtbarsten historischen Prozesse aus Unkraft des Denkens leugnen. [...] So weit ist [die Übersetzung] entfernt, von zwei erstorbenen Sprachen die taube Gleichung zu sein, daß gerade unter allen Formen ihr als Eigenstes es zufällt, auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken.³⁴

Therefore translation cannot aim at a resemblance with the original because it is aware of difference, of the difference in language which is a difference in time. In the translation, in its latest phase of life, in its "Fortleben" the original undergoes radical changes, changes that are neither due to the subjectivity of following generations, nor to the confrontation of the foreign language in the translation alone, but to the "life of language itself", to the

“Nachreife des fremden Wortes”. Once again the interpretation of this metaphor of “Nachreife” – echoing the metaphors of “Überleben” and “Fortleben” – determines the final understanding of the meaning of translation.

It does not surprise that this metaphor of “Nachreife” plays a minor role in Jacques Derrida’s interpretation. It is only mentioned once, in passing: “Post-maturation (*Nachreife*) d’un organisme vivant ou d’une semence”³⁵, which is a very vague translation of the term. But Derrida seems to be aware of the difference in meaning of “post-maturation” and “Nachreife” and of the difficulty of translating the latter. He has opted for marriage, birth (rebirth) and the eternal *différance* as the basic metaphors of the relationship of translation and original. And there are words in Benjamin’s explanation of “Nachreife” that seem to support this choice. The original undergoes not only a metamorphosis (“Wandlungen”) but also a renewal of life (“Erneuerungen des Lebendigen”). And the pain that the translation experiences could also be interpreted as the pangs of birth, the labour (Geburtswehen) – as Derrida himself translates it, and Paul de Man vehemently denies. But as we have seen before, with Derrida this also means a parting from the original which remains behind, untouchable, virginal, forever apart. The translator and his double, the translation, remain as the dominant figures in Derrida’s interpretation, as agents of *la différence*.

Paul de Man’s interpretation, however, is centered on his understanding of “Nachreife”:

Benjamin has just been speaking of the “*Nachreife* des fremden Wortes,” translated by Zohn as “maturing process”, which again is wrong. *Nachreife* is like the German word *Spätlese* (a particular good wine made from the late rotten grape), it is like Stifter’s novel *Nachsommer* (“Indian Summer”) it has the melancholy, the feeling of slight exhaustion, of life to which you are not entitled, happiness to which you are not entitled, time has passed, and so on. [...] *Nachreife* [...] is by no means a maturing process, it is a looking back on a process of maturity that is finished and that is no longer taking place.³⁶

Again de Man criticizes the translator vehemently: Zohn’s “maturing process” is simply “wrong”. The translator has failed again. As could be expected by

Paul de Man, because it is impossible to translate. And if it is impossible to translate – which at least throws a shadow of a doubt on the possibility of understanding, and interpreting – we are indeed set into a state of melancholy towards an original, that cannot be recovered, that has been lost – to death. De Man's interpretation of Stifter's novel *Nachsommer*, the imagery he comes up with in the following lines, is certainly adequate. So is the paraphrasing of "Spätlese" – a particular good wine made from the late rotten (or rotting?) grape. However, the German word "Nachreife" has a much richer meaning to it.

First of all it should be noted that German also uses the Latin word "Postmaturation", but only for gynaecological complications, when the child to be born is past the normal maturing process and therefore classified as overdue. Grimm's dictionary of German offers two examples of "Nachreife". One is a state referring to a succession and a metaphor of resemblance, paraphrasable in German as "reifend nachfolgen". An example from literature is added: the child follows the old man in its maturing process towards death³⁷, meaning it will repeat the same pattern with the same outcome. A meaning which cannot be found in Benjamin, and which is also not considered by Derrida or de Man.

The second meaning of "Nachreife" belongs indeed to the realm of harvesting fruit. Yet there are two patterns of which de Man mentions only one: die Spätlese. The meaning of this word is not equivalent to "Nachreife", but rather a product of "Nachreife". In the 18th century vinyards needed a special permission to be allowed to harvest grapes and produce wine. The story goes that one year the messenger of one vinyard returned too late with this permission. But the wine growers, instead of refraining from using the grapes that then had already been rotting for a while, used these rotten fruits to make the wine and so created the first delicious Spätlese. What makes this wine so delicious is its "Edelfäule", its exquisite mould.³⁸ Now there is nothing whatsoever "melancholic" (de Man) about this Spätlese, quite the opposite, it is a brilliant example of the possibilities of an aging process, of the value of something old, which is much too often overlooked. But these grapes, once they are harvested, will soon rot, deteriorate.

The second pattern of "Nachreife" in fruits you can find again in Grimm: it is the characteristic of some fruits only to continue and prolong a

process of maturity even after harvesting. "Nachreife" then means: "später, nach der abnahme reifen (vom winterobste)"³⁹ – the continuation of the state of maturity even after harvesting as it is very well known with apples for example, which in winter are (dis)placed into cellars until they reach their most delicious state, without any sign of rotting. The technical term of this kind of maturity process of some fruits only is indeed: climacteric, the same Greek word used to describe the last phase, the climax, of the process of maturity until its very end (the menopause), that is, the process of aging in women. It is indeed the influence of senescence that creates the "Nachreife" in these fruits.

This climacteric of course is a long way from death, and equally far away from reproduction. So instead of understanding Benjamin's concept of translation as a wedding and child birth like Jacques Derrida or the afterlife of a dead original as Paul de Man, both of which cut off the original and therefore undermine the idea of translatability, I find in Benjamin's concept of translation a poetics of aging, which allows for a much closer relationship between translation and original, without denying *différance*. Derrida is as far away from Benjamin as he could be, *détours de Babel*: his argument cannot do without two parties. Even though he integrates into his theory the metonymic relationship of a marriage between translation and original, this relationship is in its essence "spiritual". Paul de Man is much closer to Benjamin in arguing that translation and original are but one (life), separated by the tragic of the original's death leaving the translation in a state of melancholy. This interpretation however cannot do without a metaphorization – if not a transcendentalization – of the basic metonymic structure of Benjamin's argument. So if de Man argues that Benjamin's metaphor is not a metaphor, one could as well argue that de Man's metonymy is not a metonymy⁴⁰. The stumbling block for both interpreters is their allegiance to *différance*, the idea that something has been displaced and postponed. This seems to call for an otherness that cannot allow the continuity of the one, an otherness that defies the law of translatability.

However, the law of translatability, the temporal structure of posteriority between the original and the translation, is at the core of Benjamin's argument, as the quotation above shows: "Denn in seinem Fortleben, daß so nicht heißen dürfte, wenn es nicht Wandlung und Erneuerung des Lebendigen wäre, ändert sich das Original." Benjamin says it explicitly: it is

the original that changes. And it changes because it continues to live, and in doing so it undergoes metamorphoses, it becomes translation, which is the “Nachreife” of the original – another state of being of the same (being), of life (“Wandlungen und Erneuerung des Lebendigen”). There is no wedding necessary, no child birth and no death. The simple basic structure of life translates into Benjamin’s description: growing old, passing a state of maturity, continuing to live, and reaching the climacteric, the climax of life, that is, literally speaking: the climax of language. The relationship of the translation to its original can be compared to the relationship of old age to youth (to the Latin term “iuventus”, that according to its definition touches on the climacteric, reaching as far as the age of 45). Old age is by definition posterior to youth; it cannot be conceptualized without youth existing before it. Youth however, implies the possibility of old age, even though it may never reach it.

Most of Benjamin’s metaphors touch this process of aging. The broken vessel – itself an image taken from lifetime – reflects not only the scars of growing old, but also the aporia of the concept of autobiography, to describe as one (Gesamtkunstwerk) what is only shattered pieces. And yet it *is* one life. The metaphor showing the original as fruit with skin and the translation as a king’s robe surprises by its swerve in imagery. As a metaphor of posteriority one would have expected the tight fresh skin of a mature fruit and the loose, wrinkled skin of the rotting Spätzle. The king’s robe not only alludes to the heterogeneity of life but also to the superior distance a matured old age may show towards its own earlier stages of life. A poetics of aging does not imply a clear-cut autobiography, a smooth life-cycle, but rather hints at the monstrous otherness of metamorphosis⁴¹. The aging process itself is *différance*, postponing and displacing what is supposed to be one.

The following sentence taken from the above quotation of Benjamin once again shows the importance of the unity as well as of the *différance* in the relationship of translation and original:

So weit ist [die Übersetzung] entfernt, von zwei erstorbenen Sprachen die taube Gleichung zu sein, daß gerade unter allen Formen ihr als Eigenstes es zufällt, auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken.⁴²

Translation is not the mere product of two dead languages, but rather a process of change, a temporal structure: it is the awareness of *Nachreife* and *Wehen*. The translation is painfully aware of its posteriority. It is concerned with this process of aging, with the *différance* that displaces the original in the translation. This means that the translation could well understand itself – and can be understood – as the “*Nachreife auch der festgelegten Worte*”, feeling indebted and predestined, feeling related to the original, yet nevertheless strangely deformed and apart, as far apart as two broken fragments of a vessel joined together under the imperative to be one and refer to life.

- 1 So, too, the connoisseur of literary criticism sometimes relishes the *Spätlesen* in his own field. Since Paul de Man's and Jacques Derrida's papers on Walter Benjamin's *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* a lot of new books on Walter Benjamin have been published, however, none as fascinating and as relevant for the inquiry of the paper in hand. For further reading on translation, cf: Christiaan Hart Nibbrig: *Übersetzen. Walter Benjamin*, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 2001.
- 2 Jacques Derrida: „Des tours de Babel“, in: Jacques Derrida: *Psyché. Invention de l'autre*, Paris (Editions Galilée) 1987-1998, p. 211.
- 3 Paul de Man: „Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's “The Task of the Translator”“, in: Paul de Man: *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis (University of Minnesota Press) 1986, p. 73. “Conclusions” was the function of de Man's final lecture at Cornell University in 1983. The printed text is based on tape recordings.
- 4 Paul de Man, op.cit., p. 74.
- 5 Ibid., p. 79.
- 6 Walter Benjamin: „*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*“, in: Charles Baudelaire: *Tableaux parisiens*, in: Walter Benjamin: *Gesammelte Schriften* IV,1, ed. Tillman Rexroth, Frankfurt (Suhrkamp) 1972, p. 21.
- 7 Paul de Man, op.cit., p. 80.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, op.cit., p. 218.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, op.cit., p. 9.
- 10 Ibid., p. 9.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Derrida, op.cit., pp. 211-212.
- 13 Cf. Jacques Derrida: *La carte postale, de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, Paris (Flammarion) 1980.
- 14 Carol Jacobs: “The Monstrosity of Translation“, in: *Modern Language Notes* 90 (1975). Much later Carol Jacobs has incorporated this interpretation of Walter Benjamin's style in a broader analysis, cf. Carol Jacobs: *In the language of Walter Benjamin*, Baltimore (Johns Hopkins University Press) 1999.
- 15 De Man, op.cit., p. 83.
- 16 Cf. Jacques Derrida: *L'écriture et la différence*. Paris (Editions du Seuil) 1967.

- 17 Benjamin, op.cit., p. 10.
- 18 Ibid., pp. 10-11.
- 19 De Man, op.cit., p. 85.
- 20 ... and in a non-Christian context such as Germanic religion and myth in the sense of: "The warriors lived on in Walhalla", but again, then they are certainly not dead.
- 21 Gandillac: "La tâche du traducteur", quoted by Derrida. Jacques Derrida: "Des tours de Babel", op.cit., p. 214.
- 22 Derrida, op.cit., pp. 213-214.
- 23 Ibid., p. 224.
- 24 For „hymen“ cf.: Jacques Derrida: *La dissemination*, Paris (Editions du Seuil) 1972.
- 25 Derrida: „Des tours de Babel“, op.cit., p. 224-225.
- 26 Ibid., p. 214.
- 27 Ibid., p. 227.
- 28 Benjamin, op.cit., p. 18.
- 29 De Man, op.cit., p. 90.
- 30 Derrida: „Des tours de Babel“, op.cit., p. 223.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Benjamin, op.cit., p. 15.
- 33 Ibid., p. 14.
- 34 Ibid., pp. 12-13.
- 35 Derrida: „Des tours de Babel“, op.cit., p. 217.
- 36 De Man: op.cit., p. 85.
- 37 Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 13, p. 101, München 1984. The German original is a quotation from a poem by Lenau: „dem greise, der an krücken sich geschleift, ist schnell das kind zum sterben nachgereift.“
- 38 Cf.: H. Dippel/C. Lange: *Das Weinlexikon*, Frankfurt (Fischer) 2003.
- 39 Grimm, op.cit., ibid.
- 40 Of course Derrida and de Man are well aware of their uses and “abuses” of metaphor and metonymy. This displacement of tropoi is part of their concepts of translation. Nevertheless there remains this questionable imagery of wedding, child birth, and death.
- 41 Cf.: G. Deleuze/F. Guattari: *Mille plateaux*, Paris (Les Editions de Minuit) 1980. The concept of “rhizom” could come to mind in this context.
- 42 Benjamin, op.cit., pp. 12-13.