THE MONSTROSITY OF TRANSLATION

BY CAROL JACOBS

> Darin besteht das eigentliche
> Kunstgeheimnis des Meisters, dass
> er den Stoff durch die Form vertilgt.
>
> Schiller, cited by Benjamin in
> "Zwei Gedichte von Friedrich
> Holderlin"

In 1923, when Walter Benjamin published his translations of Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens," he prefaced them with a short essay entitled "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers."[1] Was this intended to unfold for us the nature of the difficult task that claimed so many years of Benjamin's life? Does it signify an unprecedented consideration for the understanding of his readers—for those to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties? No less than the introductory poem of Baudelaire's "The Flowers of Evil," ("Au lecteur"), the opening lines of Benjamin's essay close the gates abruptly on such illusions of brotherly concern. "The poem to the reader closes with the apostrophe: 'Hypocritical reader,—my likeness,—my brother!' The situation turns out to be more productive if one re-formulates it and says: [Benjamin] . . . has written an [essay] . . .that, from the beginning, had little expectation of an immediate public success" (from "Uber einige Motive bei Baudelaire," I.2:607[2]). "Nowhere does consideration for the perceiver with respect to a work of art or an art form prove fruitful for their understanding . . . . For no poem is intended (gilt) for the

[1] Translated as "The Task of the Translator," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1969). Harry Zohn's lucid translations have made a decidely meaningful contribution to the understanding of Benjamin by an English-speaking audience. The criticism that appears here and there in my text should be recognized more as a play between possible versions than as a claim to establish a more "correct" translation.

[2] All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972). References are made with the volume number (in roman numerals) followed by the part of that volume (in arabic numerals), a colon, and the page number. The translations, such as they are, are my own.

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reader, no image for the beholder, no symphony for the audience" (IV.1:9).

What Benjamin's essay performs (and in this it is exemplary among his works) is an act of translation. It is to begin with a translation of "translation," which then rapidly demands an equally violent translation of every term promising the key to its definition. "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" dislocates definitions rather than establishing them because, itself an uncanny translation of sorts, its concern is not the readers' comprehension nor is its essence communication.

> Is a translation intended *(gilt)* for the readers who do not understand the original? . . . . What does a piece of writing "say"? What does it communicate? Very little to him who understands it. The essential is not communication, not assertion . . . . If it [the translation] were aimed at the reader, the original would have to be also. If the original does not exist for him, how could the translation be understood in this respect.
>
> (IV.1:9)

If one by one once familiar words become incomprehensibly foreign, if they relentlessly turn on their traditional ("althergebrachte," "herkommliche") meanings, if the essay systematically roots itself in that tradition only to shift the very ground it stands on, this, after all, is the way in which translation functions. For Benjamin, translation does not transform a foreign language into one we may call our own, but rather renders radically foreign that language we believe to be ours. Benjamin cites Rudolf Pannwitz:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a false grounding: they wish to germanize Hindi, Greek, and English instead of hindicizing, grecizing and anglicizing German. They have a much more significant respect for their own linguistic usage than for the spirit of the foreign work. . . the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the incidental state of his own language instead of letting it be violently moved by the foreign.
>
> (IV.1:20)

This invasion of the foreign is perhaps merely prescriptive for other translations, for the initial attack on his audience immediately gives way to a more amicable rhetoric of life, kinship, harmony, fidelity, religion, and nature. As in Baudelaire, where the wounds inflicted by "Au lecteur" are soon to be soothed by the balm of

"Correspondances,"[3] so in Benjamin's essay, it would seem we find ourselves again on native soil.

In the metaphorical climate that now sets in, translations seem to blossom forth from the original as a continuation of that former "life"[4]—as a "transplant," a "ripening," a germination of the original "seed." But for all this apparently abundant flourishing, at no point does translation relate organically to the text that precedes it. On this point Benjamin is as ironical as he is deceptive. The "Entfaltung" (unfolding[5] IV.1:11) that the life of the original achieves in translation never quite brings its seeds to flower. Translation denies the linear law of nature in order to practice the rule of textuality. If the original "cannot reach . . .[the realm of linguistic fulfillment] *root and branch" (mit Stumpf and Stiel,* italics mine, IV.1:15), this figure of speech, metaphorical for completion in both German and English, must also be taken in its "fully unmetaphorical reality" (IV.1:11). Nowhere in the essay does translation develop beyond the germ ("keimhaft" IV.1:12), the kernel ("Kern" IV.1:15), the seed ("Samen" IV.1:17).

> More precisely, this essential kernel is definable as that in translation which, in its turn is untranslatable . . . . Unlike the poetic word of the original, it is not translatable because the relationship of content to language is completely different in the original and the translation. If language and content constitute a certain unity in the original, like fruit and rind, the language of translation envelops its contents in vast folds like an emperor's robes. For this language signifies a loftier language than its own and therefore

[3] Benjamin's essay could well be read as an ironical commentary on the traditional reading of "Correspondances" (see "Uber einige Motive bei Baudelaire," I.2:638-48, where Benjamin reinterprets the "correspondances" as a temporal displacement bound to the "essentially distant," the "inapproachability" of the cult image. For a general discussion of the concept of symbolic language which the Baudelaire piece poses, see Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1969) as well as Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* I.1:336-7 and 342.

[4] The connection between original and translation "may be called a natural one," Benjamin writes, "more precisely a connection of life," ("ein Zusammenhang des Lebens," IV.1:10). To make his meaning clear, he repeats the syllables "Leben" sixteen times in the course of the paragraph, and midway through clears it of its traditional meaning. The "life" to which translations are bound is itself woven into textual history. "The sphere of life must ultimately be fixed in history, not in nature . . . . Thus the task arises for the philosopher to understand all natural life through the more encompassing life of history" (IV.1:11).

[5] Harry Zohn translates "Entfaltung" as "flowering"—and understandably so, for this extension of the metaphorical web is a natural one. It is not, however, Benjamin's.

> remains non-adequate, violent and foreign with respect to its own content.
>
> (IV.1:15)

The natural metaphors for translation produce the opposite of organic fruition. The "Nachreife" (IV.1:12 and 13) hardly completes the maturing process of the original, but rather withers the fruit of meaning. The "unfolding" of the original paradoxically results in a proliferation of abundant folds that violently camouflage the content while maintaining it as non-adequate otherness. No further germination is possible: "This brokenness prevents any [further] translation, and at the same time makes it superfluous" (IV.1:15).

The Ver-pflanzung (transplant, IV.1:15) of the original bespeaks far less the continued life of the plant than a displacement of its ground.

> This problem of ripening the seed of pure language in translation seems never to be solvable, to be definable in no solution. For isn't the ground pulled out from under such a language if the restitution of meaning *[Sinnes]* ceases to be decisive? And indeed nothing else—to turn the phrase negatively—is the significance of all the foregoing.
>
> (IV.1:17)

With this negative turn of the phrase, Benjamin defines translation as undefinable. The unfixable task of translation is to purify the original of meaning: only poor translations seek to restore it (IV.1:9). This is why translations are themselves untranslatable. "Translations on the other hand show themselves to be untranslatable—not because of the heaviness, but because of the all too fleeting manner in which meaning [Sinn] attaches to them" (IV.1:20).

The relation between translation and original then, although "seemingly tangible," is always on the verge of eluding understanding (IV.1:11). And eluding of understanding *(Erkenntnis)* is precisely what translation performs *(darstellt)*. Benjamin insists on the verb "darstellen," as opposed to "herstellen" or "offenbaren" (IV.1:12), for translation neither presents nor reveals a contents.[6] It touches on

[6] Translation **is then ultimately expedient for the expression of the innermost relation of languages to one another. It cannot possibly reveal [offenbaren] this hidden realtionship itself, cannot possibly establish it [herstellen], but can perform it [darstellen] by a germinating or intensive realization.**

(IV.1:12)

the meaning of the original only by way of marking its independence, its freedom—literally—to go off on a tangent: the point it chooses remains irrelevant.

> What meaning *[Sinn]* remains of significance in the relation between translation and original can be grasped in a simile. Just as a tangent touches the circle fleetingly and only at one point, and just as it is the touching and not the particular point that dictates the law according to which it takes off on its straight trajectory further into infinity, so translation touches the original fleetingly and only at an infinitely small point of meaning in order to . . . follow its own trajectory.
>
> (IV.1:19-20)

Certainly, it is its own trajectory that "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" follows when touching on such terms as fidelity, literality, and kinship. These it translates from a familiar German to another that hardly seems germane. But that, after all, is the point. Nowhere is this unfamiliarity more intensely sensed than when the essay turns to the familial relations between languages. The "kinship" Benjamin sets out to describe gathers much of its strangeness from the discrepancy between his mode of defining and his ultimate intention of definition. If we are made at all familiar with the notion of kinship, it is by learning what kinship is not. Kinship between languages is not similarity (IV.1:12 and 13) nor can it guarantee the preservation, in translation, of the original's form and sense. Benjamin touches fleetingly here on a point of epistemological concern.

> In order to grasp the genuine relation between original and translation, we must set up a deliberation whose design is completely analogous to the train of thought in which a critique of cognition demonstrates the impossibility of a mimetic theory. *[And tangentially the impossibility of traditional epistemology.]* If it is shown here that there could be no objectivity in knowledge—not even a claim to it—if it consisted in duplication of the real, then it can be proven here that no translation would be possible if it strove with its total being for similarity with the original.
>
> (IV.1:12)

This explains why kinship may only be defined negatively. The kinship between languages generates their *difference:* on what basis could translation claim to duplicate the original if no language, however original, in turn guarantees the objective reality of that which it names?

For all this insistence on kinship as differentiation, kinship sets forth a certain sameness as well. The elusive nature of this sameness presents particular difficulties to the English translator. In the long passage that speaks of this sameness, Harry Zohn remains far less "true" to the original, far less "literal" than the text demands. This is because he maintains a significant respect for his own linguistic usage, and, traditionally, that is to his credit. Understandably then, his translation results in phrases such as "the same thing," "the same object," where the German speaks neither of objects nor things. In an admittedly germanized English, the passage would read as follows:

> [A]ll suprahistorical kinship of languages rests in the fact that in every one of them as a whole . . . one and the same is meant [gemeint], which, however, is not reachable by any one of them, but only by the totality of their mutually supplementing intentions — pure language. While, namely, all individual elements of foreign languages — the words, sentences, contexts — exclude one another, these languages supplement one another in their intentions. To grasp this law, one of the fundamental laws of the philosophy of language, is to differentiate what is meant *[dm* ***Gemeinte]*** from the manner of meaning *[die* **Art des** *Meinens]* in the intention. In "Brot" and "pain" what is meant is indeed the same, the manner of meaning it, on the other hand, is not. . . . While in this way the manner of meaning in these two words is in conflict, it supplements itself in both languages from which they are derived. The manner of meaning in them supplements itself into what is meant. In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather it is grasped in a constant state of change until it is able to step forward from the harmony of all those manners of meaning as pure language.
>
> (IV.1:13-14)

What is meant in "Brot" and "pain" is "the same," but this is not to say that they mean the same ***thing.*** The same that is meant is "pure language." Benjamin states this quite literally at the beginning and end of the passage, but a hunger for substance could well allow us to forget it. What is meant by "pure language"? Certainly not the materialization of truth in the form of a supreme language. Benjamin sets this temptation aside with a passage from the "Crise de vers" (IV.1:17). He displaces his own text with the foreignness of Mal-

larme's in which the latter insists on the insurmountable disparity between languages. The "pure languge" of the lengthy citation above does not signify the apotheosis of an ultimate language but signifies rather that which is purely language—nothing but language. "What is meant" is never something to be found independently of language nor even independently in language, in a single word or phrase, but arises rather from the mutual differentiation of the various manners of meaning. There isn't quite so much difference as one might suspect then, between "kinship" as sameness and "kinship" defined as differentiation, for each generates the other, in language, indefinitely.

In a sense, one could argue, the kinship of language as here defined says nothing after all. If so, the translation of Benjamin has been rendered with the great fidelity the essay requires. For the translator's task of "fidelity" ***(Treue)*** calls for an emancipation from all sense of communication (IV.1:19), a regaining of pure language. The "one and the same" which is meant in pure language means nothing.

> [T]o win back pure language formed in the flux of language is the violent and single power of translation. In this pure language, which no longer means anything and no longer expresses anything, which, as expressionless and productive word, is that which is meant in all languages, all communication, all meaning and all intention ultimately meet with a stratum in which they are destined to extinction.
>
> (IV.1:19)

This productive word which renders meaning extinct is that of literality ***(Wortlichkeit).*** In the text of translation, the word replaces sentence and proposition as the fundamental element (IV.1:18). A teratogenesis instead of conventional, natural, re-production results in which the limbs of the progeny are dismembered, all syntax dismantled.

> Literality thoroughly overthrows all reproduction of meaning with regard to the syntax and threatens directly to lead to incomprehensibility. In the eyes of the nineteenth century, Holderlin's translations of Sophocles were monstrous examples of such literality . . . . [T]he demand for literality is no offspring of an interst in maintaining meaning.
>
> (IV.1:17-18)

The demand is Benjamin's, for it is this monstrosity that he praises above all as the most perfect of all translations.[7]

This exaction of literality, the passage continues, must not be understood as an interest in meaning, but "aus triftigeren Zusammenhangen" (IV.l:18). Must it be understood then "in a more meaningful context" as Zohn's translation insists (p. 78, op. cit.)? Or is the con-textuality of original and translation such that this phrase too must be taken literally. The linking together of the two would then be "triftig" in its etymological sense—from *treffen*—as striking, fragmentary. This is certainly the point if not the tone of the simile that follows.

> Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together, must follow one another in the smallest detail but need not resemble one another. so, instead of making itself similar to the meaning [Sinn] of the original, the translation must rather, lovingly and in detail, in its own language, form itself according to the manner of meaning [Art des *Meinens]* of the original, to make both recognizable as the broken part of a greater language, just as fragments are the broken part of a vessel.
>
> (IV.1:18)

In this, its literal translation,[8] the passage leaves things incomplete. With the joining together of translation and original, language remains a Bruchstuck. Such is the mode of Benjamin's articulation despite its apparent reference to organic growth, kinship, sameness, fidelity. And it is after all also the vision of the "angel of history" in

[7] Holderlin's translations are touched upon at three other points in the essay—and always spoken of as exemplary.

> Here as in every other essential regard, Holderlin's translations, especially those of the two Sophoclean tragedies, present themselves as a confirmation. The harmony of the languages is so deep in them, that the meaning [Sinn] is touched by the language only as an aeolian harp is touched by the wind. Holderlin's translations are originary images [Urbilder] of their form: they relate themselves even to the most perfect translations of their texts as the originary-image to the example . . . .
>
> (IV.1:20-21)

[8] Zohn's translation is perhaps more logical, certainly more optimistic, but doesn't quite form itself in detail according to the strange mode of Benjamin's meaning.

> In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of theoriginal, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (Zohn, op. at, p. 78)

the "Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen" (part IX)[9] and that of Baroque allegory in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* ("Allegorie und Trauerspiel").

Perhaps this helps account for the involuted formulation—translation must awaken from its own language the original's echo, This is not to say that translation echoes the original. Translation relates to the original as to pure language—in a way that the original, so laden with its apparent content, is rarely deemed to function.

> In this lies a characteristic of translation totally different from that of poetic works, since the intention of the latter is never towards language as such, its totality, but rather solely and directly towards definitive linguistic coherences of content. Translation, however, does not view itself as does poetry as in the inner forest of language, but rather as outside it, opposite it, and, without entering, it calls into the original, into that single place where, in each case, the echo is able to give in its own language the resonance of a work in a foreign tongue.
>
> (IV.1:16)

To locate the source of these reverberations is not an easy matter. Though, logically, the original should originate the call, Benjamin's formulation leaves this task to translation.

[9] Gershom Scholem, in writing about this text, relates the figure of the angel of history to the *Tikkun* of the Lurianic Kabbalah.

> **Yet at the same time, Benjamin has in mind the kabbalistic concept of the *Tikkun*, the messianic restoration and mending which patches together and restores the oginal Being of things, shattered and corrupted in the "Breaking of Vessels," and also [the original Being of] history. ("Walter Benjamin und sein Engel," in *Zur* Aktualitat *Walter Benjamins* [Frankfurt: Suhrkamp,** 1972], **pp.** 132-33.)

If Scholem recognizes the failure of the angel of history to carry out this task, he nevertheless sees evidence of this redemption elsewhere in Benjamin (ibid, pp. 133-34).

Scholem might have turned to "Die Aufgabe des Ubersetzers," where the image of the broken vessel plays a more direct role. Harry Zohn's (mis)translation of this passage (cited in footnote 8) along with Benjamin's carefully articulated messianic rhetoric seem to speak here of the successful realization of the *Tikkun*. Yet whereas Zohn suggests that a totality of fragments are brought together, Benjamin insists that the final outcome of translation is still "a broken part." In the Lurianic doctrine, then, translation would never progress beyond the stage of the *Shevirath Ha-Kelim*. (For a description of this "Breaking of Vessels" as Benjamin knew it, see Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* [New York: Schocken, **19731.)** In the closing passage of "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers," the messianic valorization of the holy scriptures ironically serves to usher in the fundamental fragmentation which interlinear translation performs.

There is an unmistakable echo here of a German saying that both amplifies and clarifies the predicament: "Wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt's heraus."[10] Translation's call into the forest of language is not a repetition of the original but the awakening of an echo of itself. This signifies its disregard for coherence of content, for the sound that returns is its own tongue become foreign. Just as the vase of translation built unlike fragment on unlike fragment only to achieve a final fragmentation, so the echo of translation elicits only fragments of language, distorted into a disquieting foreignness.

But who pieces the vase together? Who sounds the echo? Which is to say, who writes the text of translation? Or are these questions that necessarily lose their meaning in the context of the essay. By now it is evident that when Benjamin speaks of "translation," he does not mean translation, for it has never ceased to aquire other, foreign, meanings. One is tempted to read "translation" as a metaphor for criticism, to offer the answer that the critic writes translations. How else to explain the following:

> Translation transplants therefore the original into a more—in so far as ironically—conclusive language realm, since it cannot be displaced from it through further translation . . . . The word "ironically" does not recall thoughts of the romantics in vain. They above others possessed insight into the life of works of which translation is the highest testimony. To be sure they did not recognize translation as such, but turned their entire attention to criticism . . . .
>
> (IV.1:15)

Translation may indeed be metaphorical for criticism, but the critical text is inexorably bound to a certain irony. That irony dislocates the syntax of Benjamin's phrase as well as the tentative solution to the question "who writes," in which our own critical distance was not ironical enough.

"Translatability," which we might also call the critical text within, is a potential of the work itself.

> Translatability belongs to certain works essentially—which is not to say that their translation is essential to them, but rather that a certain significance dwelling within the originals expresses itself in their translatability.
>
> (IV.1:10)

[10] "As one calls into the forest, so it will resound."

This, then, is the text-ness of the text or a criticism without critic. From the very beginning, the essay dismisses the necessity of a translator for translation.

> [C]ertain relational concepts maintain their good, perhaps best sense, when they are not a priori exclusively referred to man. In this way one might speak of an unforgettable life or moment even if all men had forgotten it. When, namely, its essence demands not to be forgotten, then that predicate would not correspond to something false, but rather to a demand which does not correspond to man, and would at the same time include a reference to a realm to which it does correspond — to a remembrance of God. (IV.1:10)

The translatability of the text excludes the realm of man and with him the translator, the figure to which Benjamin's essay is devoted. The "Aufgabe" of the translator is less his task than his surrender: he is "aufgegeben," given up, abandoned. This is its initial irony.

Yet no sooner is the figure of man abandoned, than another appears to offer itself. At the beginning and the end Benjamin turns to the realm of religion which seems to redeem this monstrous loss (if also, in a sense, to cause it). This is the way, in the essay's closing paragraph, he writes of Holderlin's translations — the most perfect of their kind. The overwhelming danger they create may only be contained by the holy script.

> [B]ecause of this there lives in them [Holderlin's translations] above all the monstrous and originary danger of all translation — that the gates of a language so expanded and controlled may fall shut and enclose the translator in silence . . . . In [these translations] . . . meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to lose itself in the bottomless depths of language. But there is a halt [Halten]. However, no text guarantees it but the holy text . . . .
>
> (IV.1:21)

What is it exactly that the holy scripture vouchsafes? Is it really a halt to the precipitous loss of meaning or must we translate "Halten" rather as a holding and retaining of that loss. For in the holy scriptures meaning no longer separates language and revelation. The holy text is totally literal, in Benjamin's sense of the word, which is to say, because no meaning stands behind its language, because language and revelation coincide absolutely, it is as absolutely meaningless as an original may be.

> However, no text guarantees it but the holy text, in which meaning has ceased to be a watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where a text belongs to a truth or doctrine immediately, without the mediation ofmeaning, in its literalness of true language—that text is absolutely translatable . . . . Such boundless trust with respect to it is demanded from the translation that just as in this [holy text] language and revelation are united without tension, so in the translation, literality and freedom must join in the form of the interlinear version. For to some degree, all great writings, but above all the holy scriptures, contain their virtual translation between the lines.
>
> (IV.1:21)

And what of Benjamin's "between the lines," for from the beginning, we recognized this essay as a translation of sorts. Between the lines of German, he has slipped in a phrase from the original of the holy writ: *ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος* (IV.1:18). These are the opening words of *The Gospel according to John,* and the text to which Benjamin's clearly refers when it speaks of the holy scriptures. "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" serves as a translation for the following lines which are given below in an interlinear, literal, translation from Luther's version of the text.

1. Im Anfang war das Wort, und das Wort war bei Gott
1. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God
und Gott war das Wort.
and God was the word.
2. Dasselbige war im Anfgang bei Gott.
2. The same (the word) was in the beginning with God.
3. Alle Dinge sind durch dasselbige gemacht und ohne
3. All things are through the same made and without
dasselbige ist nichts gemacht, was gemacht ist.
the same is nothing made which made is.

This is the final irony.

The Johns Hopkins University