

Liviu COSTIN*

The Uncanny of Translation

Abstract: This article tries to provide a close reading of Walter Benjamin's well-known essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923). Starting off with a critique of the traditional concept of translation as the restoration of meaning from the language of the original work into the language of translation, it is then showed - drawing on a range of Derrida's writings - that through this inherited concept of translation emerges a different way of thinking "translation", a different way of understanding the relationship between the interiority and exteriority of languages in general. It is argued that from the very beginning of his essay, Benjamin "abandons" (*aufgeben*) or, as this singular gesture of Benjamin is read through in this article, interrupts the teleological structure of the traditional concept of translation, based on the belief in the equivalence of different languages, in order to develop new possibilities of thinking the notion of translation. Far from the securing claims provided by the traditional concept of translation (restoration, equivalence, symmetry, memory, meaning, reception etc.), the new conceptual openness - made accessible through Benjamin's gesture of "abandoning" or, to put it more clearly, reading through and transforming the structures of tradition - resembles Freud's reflections from *Das Unheimliche* (1919). Eventually, it is argued that this resemblance is a structural one. The task of the translator consists, therefore, in reaching at a point, located in-between these uncanny structures (spaces, languages, traditions), of ecstatically pointing toward pure language.

Keywords: Benjamin, Derrida, archive, language, translation, uncanny, singularity, signification, ecstatic structures.

Pour mes enfants, Iosif-Horia et Marie-Rose:
L'instant de la traduction est une extase.

1. In the Beginning of Translation... (*Enter Sandman*)

As Brits say: First things first! First, the beginning of translation. When and where does the act of translation begin? When and where does it take place? Does it have a firmly delimited place? When does the act of

* Liviu Costin, PhD Philosophy, "Mihail Kogălniceanu" Highschool, Vaslui, Teacher of Logic and Philosophy. Email: liviucoatin2013@yahoo.com

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translation end? What are the ends (*telos/skopos*) of the act of translation? What is the task (*die Aufgabe*) of translator? What are his/her responsibilities? All of these are some questions regarding the difficult subject of translation. Let me start with this subject of the beginning of translation or, generally, with the beginning itself! As I have already said, let the first be itself! Let the beginning appear as such! Let it appear itself from itself! Let it be!

I want to begin in a traditional spirit, in the spirit of the sacred traditions, if I may, by taking, right here and right now, a stand for justice. A stand for justice on an issue always hardly, if not impossible, archivable due to its structural singularity and secrecy. I want to preserve, first of all, the memory of the first beginning, the one and only beginning. I want to save the memory of the structural singularity of the beginning or, as they say, the memory of that which is one of the kind. I want to keep the memory of, speaking conventionally, a structure - an impossible structure as well as a structure of the impossible - which is at the beginning of every kind as the secret or the "other" of every possible kind (be it concept, rule, class, species, race, family, genus, or any other order of *solo numero*). This singular/secret structure or, better, this structure of singularity/secrecy is a remainder, a trace, to use Derrida's lexis, of an uncanny thought: the excessive, incalculable, aneconomical and disruptive difference. *Tout autre est tout autre*. So, I want to inherit, to archive and to remain faithful to the impossible structure of the first beginning: singularity, that is, "something" which secretly disowns every possible kind; "something" which cannot secure itself as itself, itself as a kind - this is one of its secrets -, an uncanny remainder as well as a reminder of the uncanny; "something" which cannot be inherited either as a substance or as an essence, but rather takes the form of a universal and secret impossibility of making anything, once and for all, one's own. In short, I want to take a stand for justice on an impossible issue: the secret of the always already otherness of any possible structure of property and propriety, be it of an individual or of a general order.

This is my task – *tenter l'impossible* –, even before the beginning: to archive in advance a secret, to inherit, to emplace and to repeat, as faithfully as I can, the *inquiétant structure de l'impossible*. I want to take a stand for *singularité*, the most endangered structure because quasi-indiscernible from the perverse actions of what Freud calls "the death instinct", that is, of a secret and incessant drive to destroy in advance - silently and aneconomically - any archive, foremost its own, as well as the traces of its "proper" destruction. (Freud 1920, 2017) How could I separate (*secerner*) and decide between these two secrets: on the one hand, the heterogeneity of singularity, namely, the secret of an universal inability to make anything once and for all one's own, and, on the other, the heterogeneity of the death instinct, namely, the secret of an universal ability to destroy in advance,

secretly, any property and propriety, first of all its own? Can one be taught the secret (*secernere*) of this separation and decision? Perhaps, not. As the traditional, Christian document or fragment puts it: *L'instant de la decision est une folie* (Kierkegaard).

Let me begin, eventually, with the beginning of tradition - a "beginning" traditionally split between its spirit and its letter - and with its archival storage. I am in an uncomfortable, although funny, situation because I have to speak/write on such a difficult subject in a language which is not my native and which I cannot control it throughout. Hence, what you have here is thoroughly a translation, an always already invasion of the foreign. (This is not without a sense of irony: I have to speak/write in a foreign language - that means translating through and through and, henceforth, archiving in an unfamiliar language what I have thought, first of all, in my homely Romanian - something meaningful about an essay on the task of the translator, an essay written in German language and which I have read it foremost in translations, an essay whose main thesis (*die Setzung*), main thematic position or main imposition (*die Aufgabe*) makes an impression and imposes on me the following, uncanny position: the possibility of translation takes place at the very moment of its impossibility. Or: the possibility of translation is possible only as impossible. In short: translation as a possibility of an impossibility. Indeed, this looks like a bad joke because it describes the act of translation, the very act I am performing right here and right now, as an act which comes from a fundamentally violent (im)posture. Who can separate and decide?) Nonetheless, I am well aware of the risks of the alienation that are sheltered foremost in any native language or, more generally, in anything one might think of as one's own, as his/her proper spirit, substance or essence. I am well aware, so to speak, of the fact that we, uncanny modern beings, are least at home when we think we are most at home. That being said, let me pick up some traces and seeds of the spirit of the traditional beginning as one can find them in different archives: *In the beginning was the word... Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος... In principio erat Verbum... Im Anfang war das Wort... Au commencement était le Verb.* I want to remain faithful, as faithfully as I can, to this traditional beginning: *arkhē, logos, principium, verbum, der Anfang, das Wort, le commencement, le verb.* But in order to remain really faithful and true to the spirit – be it of the traditional beginning, of the beginning of tradition or of whatever else it may be –, one must try to receive it and repeat it as accurately as possible, and even to act it out literally.

However, it is well known that one cannot consciously control this desire for reception, repeatability, iterability etc., which means that one cannot perform a pure and faithful repetition because there is no such complete repetition, a repetition perfectly identical with itself, one

repetition, self-contained and fully closed: the repetition itself. As Derrida puts it in one of his posthumous fragments: *La fidélité ne peut être qu'inconsciente*. (Derrida 2004, 2016, 257) Fidelity doesn't belong to the self-consciousness: neither to the "itself" of the self-consciousness, nor to the intentionality of the self-consciousness. It belongs, rather, to a form of thinking or consciousness which cannot be brought back to a unified sense of self. It belongs to a non-unifiable consciousness, conventionally named as "unconsciousness". The "unconsciousness" is structurally inaccessible to self-consciousness because it is structurally incompatible with the unity that is usually expected from the concept of "self", "itself", "as such", "sameness" etc. That being said, any repetition, no matter how faithfully it can be acted out, transforms both "the thing" which is repeated and "the one" who repeats it. It is an act which springs from a multiple, multi-layered intentionality. This is why repetition is never a perfectly self-contained act, never fully closed.

In order for something to be identified as such - let's say, as spirit, beginning, tradition etc. -, it has to be re-cognizable as the same, as a form of identity, as "itself", which in turn presupposes a process of repetition and comparison of earlier instances of that "itself". But this process of iteration introduces always an element of heterogeneity, a secret (*secerneré*) into the very constitution of the same, of "itself", and this element will never be entirely homogenized, fully domesticated, once and for all identified, unveiled and put back into the sameness of "itself": *Tout autre est tout autre*. Once again, as Derrida puts it: "The iterability of an element divides its own identity *a priori* [...] It is because this iterability is differential, within each individual 'element' as well as between the 'elements', because it splits each element while constituting it, because it marks it with an articulatory break, that the remainder, although indispensable, is never that of a full or fulfilling presence." (Derrida 1977, 53) In order for something to be constituted and (publicly) identified as such, it has to be - always and already - different from itself, to carry a secret with itself, in itself and as itself. Changing a bit the meaning of an old anecdote, repeated by Kierkegaard on the last page of his *Fear and Trembling* (1843), about the impossible task of stepping in the same river twice, one can say: not only that *man kann nicht zweimal durch den selben Fluß gehen*, but also *man kann es auch nicht einmal* (Kierkegaard 2002, 208). Not only that the river doesn't stay the same, but – bluntly speaking – there is no "the same" or "oneness". Because there is always more than one repetition, because (Pardon me!) *Einmal ist keinmal*, because the "One" is always already a relation and never a fully closed and self-contained circle, then there is no fidelity, no itself of fidelity. Indeed, fidelity is always secret.

These being said, we can move forward and recognize that – as with the "itself" of repetition – fidelity is always already a heterogeneous term or, to put it differently and make even one step further, that we are dealing here

with a structure of singularity in which the heterogeneous terms, that is, the secrets are not only necessarily associated, but already contaminated and quasi-indiscernible: identity and difference, one and many, uniqueness and repetition, fidelity and liberty etc. Once again: "Iterability supposes a minimal remainder [...] in order that the identity of the *selfsame* be repeatable and identifiable *in, through,* and even *in view of* its alteration. For the structure of iteration - and this is another of its decisive traits - implies *both* identity *and* difference. Iteration in its 'purest' form - and it is always impure - contains *in itself* the discrepancy of a difference that constitutes it as iteration." (Derrida 1977, 53). This type of structure seems to go so much against the commonsense, it seems to introduce such an element of instability into our current uses of the ontological notions (spirit, substance, essence etc.) that we hardly notice it. It always remains a secrecy, a singularity. I want to read through and through this logic or structure of secrecy.

Although it seems to be an impossible task due to its heterogeneity, I still want to remain faithful at least to the memory of the traditional beginning/the beginning of tradition, faithful at least to its archival storage as one can find it inherited and documented in different languages. That is to say, if one cannot inherit the spirit of the traditional beginning, then one has to try to remain faithful at least to its letter or its lexis, faithful especially to the first word for "beginning": *arkebē*. (Either ghost or angel, I hope its spirit will, secretly, come back later. Until then I have to sleep with one eye open!) I want to cling onto and follow the letter in order to trace the spirit back, the redeeming spirit of justice for all the disowned ones. But, first of all, the justice for all the *arkebē*. First, the secret of the archive: "The concept of the archive shelters in itself, of course, this memory of the name *arkebē*. But it also *shelters* itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it." (Derrida 1996, 2) The concept of archive produces at once memory and forgetting. "Archiving well!" ends as "Forgetting well!" The act of archiving, as faithfully as it can be, is always already aporetic, paradoxical: "if there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction. Consequence: right on that which permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than that which exposes to destruction, and in truth menaces with destruction [...] The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself." (Derrida 1996, 12) This is the secret of the archive: the impossibility of archiving itself as itself, the impossibility of archiving its own possibility, its secret, its singularity, its heterogeneity. This is the one and only possibility for the archive: the universal impossibility of

a full completion and, thereby, of closing the archive once and for all. The archive is possible only under the *a priori* condition of its impossibility. In short, the archive is possible only as an open secret, as a secret decision.

How does "the archive" constitute or archive itself? How does "the archive" archive its spirit? How does *arkhē* enter *logos*? What are the secrets of the *logos* which enters *arkhē*? What are the secrets of archiving *logos* as *arkhē*, as the first, the one and only beginning? What are we to make of the relationship between "archive" and "the beginning"? What are we to make of "the archive" in "the beginning" as long as "the beginning" always ends up by going into "the archive"? What are we to make of the project of an archaeology? How does relate archive and archaeology? "[I]here is an incessant tension here between the archive and archaeology. They will always be close the one to the other, resembling each other, hardly discernible in their co-implication, and yet radically incompatible, *heterogeneous*, that is to say, *different with regard to the origin*, in *divorce with regard to the arkhē*." (Derrida 1996, p. 92) The secret between archive and archaeology lies in the beginning. For the archaeologist, the *arkhē* needs no translation because it has already reached the point outside the medium of language, a point beyond any memory of translation. Indeed, for archaeologist *arkhē* is a non-historical document, a document which demands no archive, no further reading through, interpretation, commentary. It is pure *anamnēsis*. This is the secret dream of archaeologist: Let us forget, once and for all, the archive, that is, let us forget the history! But this dream of the absolute preservation of *arkhē* is, of course, also a part of the work of the death drive: "The *arkhē* appears in the nude, without archive. It presents itself and comments on itself by itself. 'Stone talks!' In the present. *Anamnēsis* without *hypomnēsis*! The archaeologist has succeeded in making the archive no longer serve any function." (Derrida 1996, 92-93) As we have seen, if even the minimal structure of repetition, described by Derrida as iterability as well as an *a priori* condition of possibility for the archive, entails the secrecy of singularity, then any approach of the *logos* of the "beginning", any research project that does not explicitly approach this very structure of singularity, any archaeological approach in which singularity never takes place is, unconsciously, always already involved, at the expense of its credibility as a research project, in the work of the "death instinct".

2. Reading Through the Medium of Language: Singularity in the Process of Signification

In 1923, Walter Benjamin published a translation of Charles Baudelaire's second section of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), section entitled *Tableaux parisiens* (19 poems). Benjamin's *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* is an essay which prefaces and complements his translations of Baudelaire's

Tableaux parisiens. It tries, in fact, to capture, contextualize and domesticate the secret or the decision initiated in the very moment when an act of translation takes place. In order to do that, the essays both describes and acts out this desire to comprehend the singularity of the act of translation. Indeed, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* combines the language of translation, the object-language, Benjamin's essay performs the translation of the very act of translation, with the meta-language, that is to say, with the language where "the task of translator" is thematized, defined and presented. However, this interference of languages generates an uncanny effect because it stabilize and at the same time destabilize the internal coherence of the essay or, at least, what we, as readers, might expect this coherence could or should be. Benjamin tries to capture the heterogeneous structure of the act of translation and in order to do that he adopts, from the very beginning of his essay, an anti-psychological stand: the translator must abandon, as much as one can, the inherited psychological tendency - a sort of affective attachment - of preserving the current, fortuitous state of his/her native language. For his part, Benjamin's essay stresses and practices at once what it takes to be the freedom of language to pursue its own development despite any psychological and emotional expectations of the readers or translators: the invasion of the foreign and violent displacement that translation generates. He cites a fragment from *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* (Nürnberg, 1917) by 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 translator is that he holds fast to the incidental state of his own language instead of letting it be violently moved by the foreign." (Benjamin 1972, 20, translated in Jacobs 1975, 756)

Not only that translation familiarizes us with the unfamiliar, but it also violently defamiliarizes the familiar. The act of translation stages this ambivalent move of the uncanny. In view of the translator, the real stakes and tasks take place at the level of the singularity of the process of signification. This process of freely floating in ecstasy of language, this ongoing, open-ended process of signification stabilizes itself only temporarily and takes the form of different configurations or systems of power relations which tend to institute themselves upon the commonsense understanding as "natural" or ontological systems, public institutions, collective habits etc. Translator intervenes upon this apparently stabilized configurations of meaning with the destabilizing element of the heterogeneity of a foreign language and its process of signification. Indeed, the translator works, first of all, with the process of signification and with its relations of forces which are not yet, and will never be, definitively fixed as familiar meanings. The

task of the translator is to be as aware as possible of these particular relations of forces of signification, in order then to be able to intervene efficiently, that is, in a transformative way on them. The key point in this task is, on the one hand, that what we take to be "reality" (i.e. the sense of the autonomous and self-identical exteriority) is linguistically structured through and through by the process of signification, and, on the other hand, that the sense of "reality" can be transformed through the minimal structure of repetition which defines the process of signification. To put it differently, the task of the translator is at once to dislocate/relocate the very thing that allows one to recognize and identify, linguistically, "some-thing" as "one thing", or as "itself": the meaning. In short, reading through the process of signification, the translator finds out that meaning is always already differential, being both itself and something different of itself.

Because singularity has no self-contained structure, one can never grasp the singular as singular. Because it exceeds any given historical context, the singular escapes both the order of interpretation and commentary. It can never be fully traced back to a given context, so as to identify its meaning. Although singularity is always encountered in a specific context, it is structurally foreign to any given context. When it takes place, one cannot even name it properly because one cannot perceive it and cognize it as such. Encountering singularity is an experience which cannot be identified conceptually, *solo numero*, fixed once and for all. Unlike individuality, which is so unique and self-identical that it cannot be compared to any other individual - that is, any individual as such being irreplaceable -, singularity is so unique that it proves incomparable to everything else, including itself. Singularity is always already self-differentiated and one has access to it, if it has one, only indirectly, not by means of the conceptual language but through the process of signification specific to ordinary language. This is why one always encounters singularity, first and foremost, in the process of signification which entails any act of translation. The experience of singularity has an intensive quality, an affective tone, and it is true that one can describe and name this experience only improperly, metaphorically, rhetorically. For this reason singularity overtaxes not the functions of representation, but the rhetorical functions – metaphoricity, *Übertragbarkeit*, translatability, *Übersetzbarkeit* – of language. So, one has to follow further out its traces in the process of signification. Hopefully, because singularity is always historical, relational, and, to a limited extent, embodied in a context, including a linguistic one, we can follow out – in the process of signification specific to any language and any translation – the traces of singularity. So, let me enter the archive, search for documents and read them through!

Benjamin's essay begins with an anti-psychological stand regarding both the theory of art and the art as such: "In the appreciation of a work of

art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference (*Beziehung*) to a particular public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an 'ideal' receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but none of its works is it concerned with his attentiveness. No poem is intended (*gilt*) for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience."¹ The antipsychologism in Benjamin produces a concept of art purified of any anthropological residuum. In specific case of translation, Benjamin's antipsychologism is intended to produce "a strict concept (*strengen Begriff*) of translation". (Benjamin 1972, 10; 2002, 254) For that reason: "Whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader, it demonstrates this": it is "an inferior (*schlechten*) translation", that is, "the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content". (Benjamin 1972, 9; 2002, 253) Indeed, for Benjamin "the hallmark of bad (*schlechten*) translations"(Benjamin 1972, 9; 2002, 253) is "the reproduction of the sense (*Sinn*)" (Benjamin 1972, 17; 2002, 259), reproduction which takes place either "for the reader's sake" (Benjamin 1972, 9; 2002, 254) or for "the case (*die Forderung*) for literalness". (Benjamin 1972, 18; 2002, 260)

Benjamin's antipsychologism received, as far as I know, two different explications. In *Intensive Languages*, Werner Hamacher says that Benjamin's disregard for the position of subjectivity ascribed to works of art and art forms is part of his "critique of the subjectivism of Kant's theory of experience" (Hamacher 2012, 536), and stems from his view of language as "antecedent mediability", a type of mediality unconstrained by "a subject position": "Not subjectivity, but rather alterity, is *what is essential in it* [in language]; not position (*Setzung*), but rather exposure (*Aussetzung*)." (Hamacher 2012, 535) Translation is "an athletic movement of language" (Hamacher 2012, 536), a movement of an "ex-posure (*Aus-setzung*) and de-posing (*Ent-setzung*) of positing (*Setzung*)" (Hamacher 2012, 536), a movement which takes place "as the exposition and exposure of languages in a linguistic event that each of them harbors *a priori* in silence". (Hamacher 2012, 535)

For Peter Fenves, Benjamin's antipsychologism is not part of a bigger project of critique of Kant's theory of experience, but a consequence of a radicalization of Gottlob Frege's already radical antipsychologism and a deepening of his inherent wholism. Although Benjamin's language can be misleading, especially when he uses terms such as *Meinen* (meaning) and *Intention* (intention) because they evoke Husserl's theory of meaning, his line of argument "is an extrapolation of Frege's work". According to Fenves, the central thesis of Benjamin's essay on translation is this: "every language as a whole (*im ganzen*) in complementary (*ergänzende*) relation to every other one

'wishes to say' (*sagen will*) pure language. Such is the meaning or intention of every language." (Fenves 2001, 332)

In order to explain Benjamin's antipsychologism, one has to take into account the process of signification as it is described in his essay on translation. This is what I intend to do here. This process of signification comprises the following terms: "language" (*die Sprache*), "what is meant" or, as Zohn translates "the intended object" (*das Gemeinte*), "the way of meaning it" or "the mode of intention" (*die Art des Meinens*), "meaning/sense" (*der Sinn*), "signification" (*das Bedeutung*), "original" (*das Original*), "translation" (*die Übersetzung*) and "translatability" (*die Übersetzbarkeit*). In order to understand the task of the translator, one has to understand the singularity of process of signification and, thereby, the process of translatability. For Benjamin, this process has a fundamentally differential character. It comprises a series of disjunctions, the first being that between *das Gemeinte*, what a statement means, and *die Art des Meinens*, the way in which a statement is meant to mean, or, to put it simply, between "what" and "how" of meaning.

Before I will discuss this differential character of the process of translation, I want to make one observation regarding Benjamin's *Art des Meinens*. In Benjamin's essay, there is a disjunction not only at the level of his object-language, between what he describes as *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens*, but also at the level of his meta-language, a disjunction between, on the one hand, the way Benjamin conceptualizes this relation (he states it as a fundamental law of philosophy of language) and, on the other hand, the examples he proposes of this relation. It seems to me that this non-voluntary, "unconscious" multiplication of disjunctions or significations has a disturbing effect on the reader. (At least on me. But this doesn't matter because this essay, as its author put it, has not been written for the reader. It exposes a form of linguistic intelligibility which functions perfectly well in the absence of both the author's intentions and the reader's expectations.) The disjunctions that Benjamin says are active and efficient at the level of the object-language multiply themselves when are translated, re-signified - in part, but not always, by Benjamin himself - at the level of his meta-language. Paul de Man once remarked that this essay on translation or, as I hope to prove it, this essay on the singularity of the process of signification discloses through and through a structure of *mise en abyme* and, thus, becomes itself an example of what it states. "The text about translation is itself a translation, and the untranslatability which it mentions about itself inhabits its own texture and will inhabit anybody who in his turn will try to translate it. [...] The text is untranslatable: it was untranslatable for the translators [Paul de Man refers to Harry Zohn and Maurice de Gandillac, two, otherwise, very good translators from German] who tried to do it, it is untranslatable for the commentators who talk about it." (de Man 2002, 86)

The first and the foremost distinction the translator has to make and to use is that between *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens*, the object intended and the mode of intention. The concept of intention, suggests Benjamin, is split between "what" and "how". At this point concerning the relation between these two poles of the process of signification, he introduces a "law" (*Gesetz*) described as "one of the fundamental principles in the philosophy of language". There are three formulations of this fundamental law. I want to propose a close reading of this law of the process of significance in Walter Benjamin.

The first, explicit, formulation of the law of signification: in spite of their difference, *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens* completes themselves (*ergänzt sich*) in the intention of meaning, producing thus the meaning, that is, the sense (*der Sinn*). "In the words *Brot* and *pain*, what is meant is the same, but the way of meaning it is not. This difference in the way of meaning permits the word *Brot* to meaning something other to a German than what the word *pain* means to a Frenchman, so that these words are not interchangeable for them; in fact, they strive to exclude each other. As to what is meant, however, the two words signify (*bedeuten*) the very same thing. Even though the way of meaning in these two words is in such conflict, it supplements (*ergänzt*) itself in each of the two languages from which the words are derived; to be more specific, the way of meaning in them is supplemented (*ergänzt*) in its relation to what is meant." (Benjamin 1972, 14; 2002, 257) The difference between *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens* consists in the following: although the function of meaning is certainly intentional (for example, when I need to eat a slice of bread/*Brot*, in German/*pain*, in French, I have to intend or to mean "bread/*Brot/pain*", and I can do this act of meaning only by naming the word b-r-e-a-d/B-r-o-t/p-a-i-n), the object intended or meant and the peculiar way of intending, meaning or using it (i.e., naming a word) are not by default intentionally structured so as to complete themselves once and for all as Benjamin's law of language seems to suggest. In fact, considering Benjamin's examples, one can say that *die Art des Meinens* displaces *das Gemeinte* in such a way that they touch and complete one another just in order for them to separate and diverge once more. The more they touch, the less they complete one another. They do not complete each other because they seem to be mutually exclusive. As for the meaning, it seems to take place at this very point of touching, an infinitely tangential and delicate point, between *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens*, or, on the level of the totality of languages, between the original and the translation.

Commenting this law of signification, Paul de Man writes: "The translation will reveal a fundamental discrepancy between the intent to name *Brot* and the word *Brot* itself in its materiality, as a device of meaning. If you hear *Brot* in this context of Hölderlin, who is so often mentioned in

this text [Benjamin's text], I hear *Brot und Wein* necessarily, which is the great Hölderlin text that is very much present in this – which in French becomes *Pain et vin*. 'Pain et vin' is what you get for free in a restaurant, in a cheap restaurant where it is still included, so *pain et vin* has very different connotations from *Brot und Wein*. It brings to mind the *pain français*, *baguette*, *ficelle*, *bâtard*, all those things - I now hear in *Brot* 'bastard'. This upsets the stability of the quotidian. I was very happy with the word *Brot*, which I hear as a native because my native language is Flemish and you say *brood*, just like in German, but if I have to think that *Brot* [*brood*] and *pain* are the same thing, I get very upset. It is alright in English because 'bread' is close enough to *Brot* [*brood*], despite the idiom 'bread'" for money, which has its problems. But the stability of my quotidian, of my daily bread, the reassuring quotidian aspects of the word 'bread', daily bread, is upset by the French word *pain*. What I mean is upset by the way in which I mean – the way in which it is *pain*, the phoneme, the term *pain*, which has its set of connotations which take you in completely different direction." (de Man 2002, 87) The law of the necessary association between heterogeneous poles - *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens* – of the process of signification is internally displaced, inherently dispossessed by *die Art des Meinens*, or, to use the psychological category of de Man, "connotations". That is to say, the law of the necessary completion of *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens* in the form of the signification, completion which takes place independently both of the author's intentions and reader's or translator's expectations of meaning, is displaced, first of all and foremost, by the very singularity, heterogeneity and secrecy of the process of signification. One cannot regularize or complete once and for all this process of signification.

Benjamin proposes two striking examples of this law of completion (*die Ergänzung*) of *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens*, the original and the translation. The first example of the law of completion. Speaking of the necessity of fidelity in the relation between translation and original as well as of the demand for literalness, Benjamin says the following: "Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together (*zusammenfügen*) must match (*folgen*) 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 (*dem Sinn des Originals*), must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning (*Art des Meinens*), thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense." (Benjamin 1972, 18; 2002, 260) In the wake of Carol Jacobs, Paul de Man stresses that Harry Zohn's translation made clear this otherwise difficult passage from Benjamin at the expense of signifying something else than Benjamin's text actually signifies. Benjamin's text says:

"fragments of a vessel, in order to be *articulated* together", which, de Man remarks, is much better than "*glued* together"; these fragments "must *follow* (*folgen*) one another in the smallest detail" and not "must *match* (*gleich*)". We have here, says de Man, "a metonymic, a successive pattern, in which things follow, rather than a metaphorical unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance". (de Man 2002, 90) Benjamin "is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality, he says the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary." (de Man 2002, 91) If all this is true, then that means that there is no completion, no resolute complementarity of *das Gemeinte* and *die Art des Meinens*, the original and the translation. Meaning is always already inherently displaced, and if it stabilizes itself, it does so only temporarily and just in order to freely floating in ecstasy once again, through and through, in the medium of language. In case of Benjamin's essay, as de Man puts it: "What we have here is an initial fragmentation; any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*, with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment - so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly - and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it." (de Man 2002, 91) However, is it possible a fragment without the memory of an originary totality, without the totality as *arkhé*?

Literally, fragment signifies a broken totality. It is still a part of the totality from which it comes. The fragment evokes the totality, keeps the memory of a totality and desires the restoration of totality. Insofar as fragment is, thereby, still part of the totality, it has a conservative significance. Indeed, translation preserves the original but not in the form of a reproduction, imitation or restoration of the meaning or the sense (*Sinn*) of the original. The point of fidelity in the relation between original and translation doesn't point toward the literalness of the meaning or sense of the original, but to the secret process of signifying, to the singularity of pointing itself. The translator must abandon the issue of the reproduction of the original meaning as the point of completion between two different languages: "as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can – in fact, must – let itself go (*sich gehen lassen*), so that it gives voice (*ertönen*) to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction (*Wiedergabe*) but as harmony, as a supplement (*Ergänzung*) to the language in which it expresses itself (*sich mitteilt*), as its own kind (*Art*) of *intentio*. [...] the significance (*Bedeutung*) of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects (*spreche*) the great longing for linguistic complementation (*die große Sensucht nach Sprachergänzung*)." (Benjamin 1972, 18; 2002, 260) The fidelity of translation in its relation with the original must be evaluate in terms of a work of mourning for the *reine Sprache* or *Sprachergänzung*. However, and this is the

point I want to stress, the work of fidelity secretly produces the opposite of a completion: fragmentation without any memory of the *arbhē* of totality, incessant displacement both of origins and ends, heterogeneity. This is the point – the law of completion and the (im)possibility of a fragment purified of any memory and nostalgia of the totality – where Benjamin's text displaces its own meaning.

The second example of the law of completion: "Just as a tangent touches (*berührt*) a circle lightly and at but one point (*einem Punkte*) – establishing, with this touch (*Berührung*) rather than with the point (*der Punkt*), the law (*das Gesetz*) according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity (*Unendliche*) – a translation touches (*berührt*) the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense (*dem unendlich kleinen Punkte des Sinnes*), thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux." (Benjamin 1972, 19-20; 2002, 261) The point of completion does not take the form of, as one might have expected, meaning or sense as a self-contained point or moment of the otherwise fluctuant relation between original and translation. It is not the point where original and translation meet and collide. The point of completion is, rather, an ecstatic point, the point of sense (*der Sinn*), the point where "sense" signifies, however, something different than meaning or sense. It signifies an infinite direction, that is, an always already open-ended process. This "sense" is not a point but a touch (*Berührung*). The completion takes the form of an open-ended pointing toward "pure language": the process of signification.

The second formulation of the law of completion. "For this sense [of a word in the original], in its poetic significance (*dichterischen Bedeutung*) for the original, is not limited to what is meant (*dem Gemeinten*) but rather wins such significance to the degree that what is meant (*das Gemeinte*) is bound (*gebunden*) to the way of meaning (*die Art des Meinens*) of the individual word. People commonly convey this when they say that words have emotional connotations (*Gefühlston*)." (Benjamin, 1972, 17; 2002, 259-260) As one can see, Benjamin distinguishes here between four moments of the process of signification: the object intended, the mode of intention, the meaning (sense) as the result of this quasi-(im)possible complementary relation between object-intended and mode of intention, and significance. The meaning/sense is not exhausted by the object of intention (what is meant). It can take different significations depending on the relation conceptualized as the law of a complementary. However, this relation - and, in turn, the law itself that tries to conceptualize it - originates in "something" so paradoxical – unique and, nevertheless, repetitive – that Benjamin itself hesitates before it and names it both in psychological (*Gefühlston*) and antipsychological terms (*die Art des Meinens*), as if he would have known, that is to say, known in advance, that he won't be able to name

it properly and, thus, to fix it once and for all. How can one understand Benjamin's return to the psychological language when it comes to describe the very "thing" (substance? essence?) that is responsible for (im)possibility of the process of signification? Is this repetition a sign of a fundamental failure of the proper usage of language?

The third formulation of the law of completion. "Where should one look to show the kinship (*die Verwandtschaft*) of two languages, setting aside any historical connection? Certainly not in the similarity between works of literature or in the words they use. Rather, all suprahistorical kinship (*überhistorische Verwandtschaft*) between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole (*im ganzen*) one and the same thing is meant (*gemeint*). Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single (*einzelnen*) language but only by the totality (*der Allheit*) of their intentions supplementing one another (*einander ergänzenden Intentionen*): the pure language. Whereas all individual (*einzelnen*) elements of foreign languages – words, sentences, associations – are mutually exclusive, these languages supplement (*ergänzen*) one another in their intentions." (Benjamin 1972, 13-14; 2002, 256-257) As one can see, this law applies not only at the level of words and sentences, as we have already seen, but also at the level of language as a totality: every singular (*einzelnen*) language as a whole (*im ganzen*) means, in its complementary (*ergänzenden*) relation to every other singular language, the same *das Gemeinte*: pure language. This is, I think, a remarkable as well as impossible claim for the task of the translator: the claim of exceeding, by means of a reading through and through of the process of signification, any finite and determinate totality of language, and thereby having access to an *a priori* of language (*reine Sprache*), to the structure of history, actually.

3. Singularity and Pure Language

Indeed, the task of the translation is carried through the medium of historical languages. The translator, more than anyone else, is placed in this historical medium in such a way that defies any objectifying claim. Language is not essentially a historical object, an object among others in the archive. When one tries to determine a historical language as a locatable object of the medium of historical languages, as a self-contained object to be described through language itself, one ends up necessarily by creating a sort of iterable complicity or, as Benjamin puts it, a complementary relation between "the object determined" (*das Gemeinte*) and the means used for this conceptual determination (*die Art des Meinens*). One cannot go outside the language to situate it historically as merely one object among others. This means that the ecstatic, multidimensional reality of what we conventionally name as "language" is always already hidden, repressed, suppressed,

forgotten in its own historical medium, secretly archived in its very "self", preserved in its own archives, namely, in the translations.

The impossible possibility of a secret access to a secret secretly archived in the secrecy of the secret relations of every singular language both with itself and with its every other singular language – this is the task of the translator: "In all language and linguistic creations, there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears, it is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. It is the former only in the finite products of language; the latter, in the evolving of the languages themselves. And that which seeks to represent (*darzustellen*), indeed to produce (*herzustellen*), itself in the evolving of languages is that very nucleus (*Kern*) of the pure language; yet though this nucleus remains present in life as that which is symbolized itself, albeit hidden (*verborgen*) and fragmentary (*fragmentarisch*), it persists in linguistic creations only in its symbolizing capacity. Whereas in the various tongues that ultimate essence (*letzte Wesenheit*), the pure language, is tied (*gebunden*) only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning (*schweren Sinn*). To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized itself, to regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous (*gewaltige*) and only capacity of translation. In this pure language - which no longer means (*meint*) or expresses (*ausdrückt*) anything but is, as expressionless and creative Word (*ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort*), that which is meant (*Gemeinte*) in all languages - all information (*Mitteilung*), all sense (*Sinn*), and all intention (*Intention*) finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be extinguished. [...] It is the task of the translator to release (*erlösen*) in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate (*befreien*) the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work." (Benjamin 1972, 19; 2002, 261)

I want to learn how to read through and through this fragment and to understand this remarkable document. How could I enter this fragment? How could I have access not only to the meanings of this document, but also to the singularity of its process of signification? How could I discern the secrets of this archive? Its "*ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort*"? How could I signify it once again? All one can know is that pure language is something we neither see nor hear, neither locate nor identify definitively, something to which every historical language owes its ownness and which does not easily lend itself to any historical language. Conceptually, pure language is a pure impossibility, it is conceptually indiscernible, and it could be known only affectively, ecstatically through this impression or sense of resistance to any completion, to any self-contained form of identity.

Reflecting on the relation between pure language, translation and original, Benjamin writes that translation "represents" (*darstellen*) in a very special way "the innermost relationship of languages", "this hidden relationship" between languages: only by "realizing (*verwirklicht*) it in embryonic (*keimbhaft*) or intensive (*intensiv*) form", that is, only through the germ or the embryo (*Keim*) of its production (*Herstellung*). This type of representation can be found only in the sphere of linguistic life: an "intensive – that is, anticipative, intimating – realization (*Verwirklichung*)." (Benjamin 1972, 12; 2002, 255) Moreover, the pure language "ist intensiv in den Übersetzungen verborgen". (Benjamin 1972, 16) Consequently, the task of translator is that of "ripening the seed (*den Samen*) of pure language in a translation". But this task seems "to be insoluble (*scheint niemals lösbar*), determinable in no solution". (Benjamin 1972, 17; 2002, 259) The task of the translator is an aporia precisely because pure language is not a metalanguage, the language of all languages, the unifying language of all historical languages. If the pure language were a metalanguage, then the task of translator would have been seriously difficult but definitely not, as Benjamin explicitly says, an impossibility, not an insoluble task. In spite of all the work of nostalgia, in spite of "the great motif of integrating (*Integration*)" of languages "into one true language" (Benjamin 1972 16; 2002, 259), there is no pure language as one true metalanguage, a language of unified languages. The very existence of translations proves that there is no definitively reconciliation of languages in one super-language. It is true, however, that the only way in which historical languages can hope for completion (*Ergänzung*) and reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) consists in "their way of meaning" (*der Art ihres Meinens*). The hope for definitive completion and reconciliation of languages is a messianic hope. This is a hope for "a language of truth", "the true language", that is, a hope for a definitive extension of the diversity of all historical languages, a cemetery of languages, a graveyard of history: "a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets (*Geheimnisse*) for which all thought strives". (Benjamin 1972 16; 2002, 259) If pure language were a metalanguage, then it would be a fully closed, self-contained language, and the messianic hope for its completion would be, in fact, the work of the death instinct.

Werner Hamacher demonstrated that Benjamin's idea of pure language must be addressed in relation to Kant's idea of "intensive properties" (*intensive Grösse*). "Intensive properties" is a mathematical notion designating a value that remains the same when it is exposed to transformations. However, in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* Kant links this notion with that of the sensation of reality and objectness (*Sachheit*). Benjamin's concept of pure language is the form in which the materiality of language is transcendently anticipated. Intensive language is a language pointing to its own mediality (*Mitteilungen*). The pure language, as it is realized in

translations, refers to the intermediality of historical languages. "For Benjamin, translation does not anticipate a language other than that of the original - since it already speaks this other language - but rather anticipates the 'innermost relation of languages to one another' and therein the language of languages, the ground for all experience. [...] Languages are messianically anticipatory and intensive, not in their particular utterances but in the manner of their meaning. [...] The intensity of languages is the *a priori* 'what lies ahead' of translation in them." (Hamacher 2012, 507, 512, 5014)

I think that another way of dealing with Benjamin's notion of pure language is to take into account the examples of what he calls "the prototype" of translation, the exemplary model of a translation. More than anywhere else, the prototype of translation is the very place where one could document the translatability or, to put it in different terms, the achievability of an *oeuvre*, that is, to document the way in which the language of translation provides an intensive - that is, anticipative, intimating - realization of pure language. I would like to end my presentation with a discussion regarding the prototypes of translation.

3. The Secret of the Archive To-Come

Translatability, a relational concept in Benjamin, designates the law of language which consists in the *a priori* pointing to another language and, ultimately, to the indiscernible other of any known historical languages: pure language. Translatability is, thus, the law of translation. It is an *a priori* structure designating what one could call the practical possibility of the impossible, that is, a structural possibility which exceeds any given actuality or any statistical possibility. Indeed, translatability is not bounded by transmission of meaning, propositional cognition, the actual translations or the actuality of experience as a correspondence between concepts and intuitions. Translatability is bounded only by imparting (*Mitteilung*), linguisticity or mediality, that is to say, nonintellectual immediateness. Translatability is a demand made by the language itself. This means that any language is translatable, regardless of the (in)existing translators.

Translation is a form. Because translatability is the non-statistical possibility of an impossibility, the possibility of an impossibility beyond any actual impossibility, it makes possible, at the expense of its own withdrawal, the translation as form appearing. Regarding the prototypical possibilities of translation, Benjamin makes a clear-cut distinction between two types of translations: translations of poetry *vs.* translations of the sacred. In case of the former, Benjamin refers to Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles. In case of the latter, the interlinear version of the Scriptures. Both are described as one of their kind, as prototypical translations. In spite of this

common evaluation, the differences between them are striking. The differences between them are structural.

Hölderlin's translations disclose a mourning structure: the translatability of these translations originates in the indiscernability of the meaning. As Benjamin puts it: in Hölderlin's translations "the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense (*der Sinn*) is touched (*berührt*) by language only the way an Aeolian harp is touched by the wind. Hölderlin's translations are prototypes of their form. [...] For this very reason, Hölderlin's translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger (*die ungeheure und ursprüngliche Gefahr*) inherent in all translations: the gates of a languages thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence. Hölderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language." (Benjamin 1972, 21; 2002, 262) The impossibility possibility of translation generates the risk of a definitely enclosure of the process of signification and of its translatability. This enclosure generates the risk of an unending mourning for meaning. Also, the risk of an unending mourning may take the form of an incessantly desire for revenge. In other words, translatability may discharge a form of violence which aims at and ends in absolute muteness. As Hamlet says, in the end: *The rest is silence.*

The other prototype of translation discloses a messianic structure: the translatability of the Scriptures originates in the indiscernability of the *eschaton* of both the languages and the world. The interlinear translation of the Scriptures dispenses with the sense, with the spirit. It come to "a stop (*ein Halten*) [...] in which meaning has ceased to be the watershed for the flow of language and the flow of revelation. Where the literal quality of the text takes part directly (*unmittelbar*), without any mediating sense (*ohne vermittelnden Sinn*), in true language, in the Truth, or in doctrine, this text is unconditionally (*schlechthin*) translatable. To be sure, such translation no longer serves the cause of the text, but rather works in the interest of languages. This case demands (*gefordert*) boundless (*grenzenloses*) confidence in the translation." (Benjamin 1972, 21; 2002, 262) In order to put a stop to the plunge in the abyss of language, the sacred text demands a boundless confidence from the part of translator. The demands of an unending confidence may well take the form of suspending or arresting the language, that is, it may well take the form of self-violence. In other words, translatability may discharge a form of violence which aims at and ends in absolute muteness. As Hamlet says, in the end: *The rest is silence.*

Is there any common ground between these two forms of violence? Could it be an archive of the violence pointed toward the archive itself? An archive of the destruction of the archive? What is the relation between pure

language, translation and violence? All these questions remain the necessary points for a reflection to come

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (1923), in *Gesammelte Schriften* Bd. IV/1. Frankfurt/Main, 1972, p. 9. English translation by Harry Zohn, in *Walter Benjamin. Selected Writings*. Volume 1, 1913-1926. Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1996 (Fifth printing, 2002), p. 253. Harry Zohn had published a first version of his translation in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*. Ed. Hannah Arendt, New York, Random House, 1968. Critical observations regarding this translation of Harry Zohn can be found in Paul de Man, "Conclusions": *Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"*, in Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*. Foreword by Wlad Godzich. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986 (Sixth printing, 2002), pp. 73-105, and Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's abilities*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 2008, p. 57. For another English translation of Benjamin's essay, see Steven Rendall, *The Translator's Task*, in *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1997, pp. 151-165. In French, there are two translations: the first, Maurice de Gandillac's translation, Walter Benjamin, *La Tâche du traducteur*, in *Mythe et violence*. Paris, Denoël, 1971, pp. 261-275, the second, Martine Broda's translation, dedicated to Maurice de Gandillac, Walter Benjamin, *La Tâche du traducteur*, in *Poésie*, no. 55, 1991, pp. 150-158. In Romanian, there are also two translations: Walter Benjamin, *Sarcina traducătorului*, translated by Catrinel Pleșu, in *Iuminări*. Editura Univers, București, 2000, pp. 45-55, reprinted in *Iuminări*, Ideea Design & Print, Cluj, 2002, pp. 39-48; Walter Benjamin, *Sarcina traducătorului*, translated by Maria-Magdalena Angheliescu, in Walter Benjamin, *Limbaj și istorie. Eseuri filosofice*. Traducere de Maria-Magdalena Angheliescu și George State. Selecție de Rolf Tiedemann; cu un eseu de Theodor Adorno. Tact, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, pp. 53-68. For a critical discussion of Romanian translations as well as W. Benjamin's essay, see Magda Jeanrenaud, *Universalile traducerii. Studii de traductologie*. Cuvânt înainte de Gelu Ionescu. Polirom, Iași, 2006, pp. 274-275, and, especially, Magda Jeanrenaud, *Despre etica traducerii. Exerciții practice*. Editura Universității "Alexandru Ioan Cuza", Iași, 2017, pp. 75-98.

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