

Translation and the Possibility of Globality: Derrida on Benjamin on the Other Language

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In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Benjamin talks about the necessary re-newed attempt to "wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it," and about the awareness of the revolutionary classes to "make the continuum of history explode" in the now-time (*Jetztzeit*) which nevertheless comes through the invocation of the past.¹ And in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he argues that the destruction of aura in reproduction (or more precisely, *reproducibility*) and the subsequent changes in the structure of the audience's reception will "lead to a tremendous shattering of tradition" (223). He also reminds us that the social significance of the film is "inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the

traditional value of the cultural heritage" (223). How are we to understand the exact nature of this kind of powerful, violent destruction or explosion? What is the dialectical relationship, within and brought forth by this "destruction" or "explosion," between the conformist tradition and the new cultural practices, between the homogeneous, empty time and the revolutionary temporality of the "now-time"?² Although Benjamin was writing within specific space and time frame, with specific political problems and movements in mind, and he is talking about time, can we say that the "destruction" he has in mind is also a kind of "translation"? For what is translation if not the violent yet subtle, at the same time, dislocation of tradition and time, and the release of difference? Translation *and* destruction, or even more interestingly, translation *and* deconstruction? How to read *differance* from Benjamin's dialectic at a standstill? "It is the task of the translator to *release* in his own language that pure language which is *under the spell* of another, to *liberate* the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he *breaks through* decayed barriers of his own language" ("The Task of the Translator," 80; italics mine). It seems that Benjamin's dialectical destruction

aims to bring out the pure language or non-language of the radically other, the other language.

This is, however, not an argument for the analogy between destruction and translation. My argument is that by a turn to Benjamin's sometimes enigmatic notions of translation and translatability, we will be better equipped to *practice* his aesthetic/political ideas, rather than just contextualize them in the historical setting. Given that Benjamin is now part of the tradition of the left, our task would be to apply his idea of "now-time" to himself, to *con*-textualize him, not only within his historical time, as so many books have already done, but to our context and our time as well, to *translate* him, as it were, to our time. His idea of "now-time" is already that of a *citation*, a translation of contexts: "Thus, to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now [*Jetztzeit*] which he blasted out of the continuum of history" (263). His readings of the destruction of tradition (of homogeneous space, time and history) and the reproducibility of artwork are especially pertinent in the translated and transnational postcolonial condition. Reading, citing, and quoting "The Task of the Translator, thus "translating" it to a different horizon, Homi

Bhabha describes how Benjamin's ideas of translation and destruction could be useful in understanding of the migrant cultures as something new in the postcolonial world. This is Bhabha translating Benjamin into the postcolonial worlds:

I am more engaged with the "foreign" element that reveals the interstitial; insists in the textile superfluity of folds and wrinkles; and becomes the "unstable element of linkage," the indeterminate temporality of the in-between, that has to be engaged in creating the conditions through which "newness comes into the world." The foreign element "destroys the original's structures of reference and sense communication as well" not simply by negating it but by negotiating the disjunction in which successive cultural temporalities are "preserved in the work of history and *at the same time* cancelled"3

We will try to see how to regard "the performativity of translation as the staging of cultural difference," at the end of

my inquiry, after reading some essential texts on translatability. The main part of the present paper will be an attempt to bring Benjamin and Derrida into conflict, into "something like a relationship," apropos of the question of translation, but this is not, it is to be hoped, yet another appropriation of Benjamin into the camp of deconstruction. As far as I know, "Des Tours de Babel" is one of the rare full-scale engagements trying to open Benjamin's text as far as possible (to the farthest extent of not fore-closing it) and to come to terms with its difficult lesson. Derrida does *not* comment "on" Benjamin's essay on translation, which we will see in a moment. And, in "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin does *not* write anything "on" the problem of translation, for, as Carol Jacobs points out, Benjamin's essay is itself 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."⁴ For want of a metalinguistic standpoint and theoretical arrogance, there can only be translational performatives. In other words, it is a play of translations.

In an age when someone reminds us that "The foreigner is within me, hence we are all foreigners,"⁵ that we are all

"strangers to ourselves," it's time to "re-mark" the problem of translation. At this juncture, it is interesting to discover that Homi Bhabha ends his essay on "DissemiNation" with a quotation from "The Task of the Translator," a short piece of writing which is claimed to be "what has posthumously proved one of the most influential and elusive theoretical statements of our century."⁶ Homi Bhabha urges readers to read his quotation "from the nation's edge," that is to say, from the margins, from in-between, from being-in-between in "culture's transnational dissemination,"⁷ to which I will return later. But first of all, let's begin with the crucial passage:

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.

(For some interpretative reason, I am using Jacobs' translation of this passage in p. 762, in "The Monstrosity of Translation," rather than the version Homi Bhabha uses in his essay, translated by Timothy Bahti and Andrew Benjamin.⁸) At stake here are the important issues of the "central reciprocal relationship between languages" ("Task," 72) and the enigmatic status of a "greater language" or "pure language." There is always a temptation to interpret the greater language as a plenitude or totality. So Gershom Scholem, in his reading of Benjamin's Angel of History: "Benjamin's meaning includes the kabbalistic concept of *tikkun*, the messianic restoration and repair which mends and restores the original being of things, and of history as well, after they have been smashed and corrupted by the 'breaking of the vessels.'"⁹ In this light, Benjamin is considered to be longing for redemption, for the recovery of an original unity or whole.¹⁰ But, on the other hand, writing from an American version of deconstruction, Jacobs will have none of these; without directly attacking Scholem, Jacobs

challenges Zohn's "(mis)translation": "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'" (Jacobs, 763, n9). Benjamin insists! Ultimately, for Jacobs, the pure language "signifies rather that which is purely language--nothing but language" (761), language as differentiation. Significantly different from this narrowly "textualist" position, while acknowledging language as differentiation, deconstruction in fact asks how *language has already differed from itself*. Is it possible to have language itself, in itself? How to read more radically language as differential system? Can language be "fragmentation" pure and simple?

In Jacobs, we see an example how American deconstructionists themselves misunderstand the Derridean notion of textuality and *écriture* (which actually differ catachrestically from themselves), and how they fall into the pitfall their accusers dig for them. Also, in this case, we can see how misleading Benjamin's notion of "pure language" can be. Coming from an ideological position as different from Jacobs' as it can be, Richard Wolin's comment on Benjamin's

"theological philosophy of language" represents a commonly shared attitude toward his view on language: "[T]he philosophy of language remains one of the most recondite chapter of an *oeuvre* that is not generally noted for its accessibility. For if it contains the key to understanding the theological dimension of Benjamin's thought, at the same time its origins are buried deep in the forbidden recesses of Kabbalist wisdom."¹¹ Under such circumstances, it seems advisable, before we go into the details of "The Task of the Translator," to deal briefly with Benjamin's major exposition of his theory of language, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man." In this extremely "metaphysical" essay, Benjamin distinguishes between the mental being and linguistic being of language; however, he rejects both the instrumental theory of language (language as corresponding to things, which he calls the "bourgeois conception of language"¹²) and the mythical theory of language (language as expressing the essence of a thing), at the same time. "All language communicates itself" (109), but this "itself" is the mental being of language, which is other than language ("the mental entity that communicates itself in language is not language itself but something to be distinguished from it," p.

108). It should be noted, however, that this "itself," the mental entity (but it is not a "subjective" "mental" entity, one should be careful about the possible misunderstanding arising from this term), is *other than* language, yet it is *not outside* language, either: "It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language. Language therefore has no speaker, if this means someone who communicates *through* these languages" (108). It is *both* other than *and* not beyond language, at the same time. Then we come across a crucial and difficult passage:

Mental being communicates itself in, not through, a language. Which means: it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being. Mental is identical with linguistic being only insofar as it is capable of communication. What is communicable in a mental entity is its linguistic entity. Language therefore communicates the particular linguistic being of things, but their mental being only insofar as this is directly included in their linguistic being, insofar as it is capable of being communicated. (108-9)

One can notice in this passage that there is a further division within the mental being itself, besides the primary division of mental being and linguistic being. In other words, similar to Karl Marx's radical reading of the relationship between use value and exchange value of the commodity in the first chapter of *Capital I*, the mental being can be further divided into two parts: mental entity and *its* linguistic entity. The mental being is not "outwardly" identical with linguistic, yet there is an internal link between linguistic being and the linguistic entity of the mental entity. The secondary linguistic entity, out of the split within the mental entity, is the capacity for communication: "[T]hat which in a mental entity is communicable is its language. On this 'is' (equivalent to 'is immediately') everything depends. . . . Or: the language of a mental entity is directly that which is communicable in it" (109). In other words, it is communicability itself. In Rodolphe Gasche's words: "The communicable *per se* is, thus, language's language, or communicability."¹³ Yet, I have to ask: isn't this residue, this remainder that cannot be accounted for in linguisticality, isn't it incommunicability?

I cannot possibly in this paper follow through the complicated discussion of the problems of divine naming and human (Adamic) naming that ensue. But the question of (in)communicability should be borne in mind, as might be useful in understanding (un)translatability. For our present purpose, it should be noted that Benjamin uses "translation" to describe the transformation from the language of things to human language (through naming): "[N]aming is the translation of language of things into that of man. It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as translation of all the others" (117). The language of the totally other is not translatable; it's the Other language. And it should also be noted that communicability is *not* itself the ground of possibility of communication; it is still in language. Rather, communicability can be possible only *in relation to* the *non-calculable*, the *impossible* other that is still not present in the mental entity; it is the limit of communicability, for human language and communicability is the *residue* or *excess* left behind by the totally Other: "For language is in every

case not only communication of the communicable but also, at the same time, a symbol of the noncommunicable" (123). Here we should compare the above quotation with a passage in "Task," about the economy of the communicability and incommunicability, with the latter as a supplement to the former:

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 and that which seeks to represent, to produce itself in the evolving of languages, is the *very nucleus of pure language*. Though concealed and fragmentary, it is the *active force in life* as the symbolized thing itself, whereas it inhabits linguistic creations only in the symbolized form. (79; emphasis mine)

With this last important note in mind, we may (re)turn (every turn is a return) to the question of translatability.

Like Jacobs, Paul de Man focuses his discussion on this

passage and insists that the together-ness of languages, translated as "articulated together" by Jacobs, should be understood as "a metonymic, a successive pattern, in which things follow, rather than a metaphorical unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance" (de Man, 90).¹⁴ For him, the fragments are metonymically combined, or articulated, without reaching a totalizing whole, and Benjamin is here read as saying that "the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary" (91). Fragments fail to constitute a totality because, as metonyms, translations follow the originals, or the originals follow translations, in dispersion, without resemblance or adequation (in the passage, "in its own language, [translation must] form itself according the manner of the original"). Both the original and the translation are fragments, in their relation to "a greater language"; they are related in some way other than the way of resemblance (in de Man's opinion, "metaphorical" resemblance), but it is the translation that must "make both recognizable as the broken part of a greater language": the translation displaces, dislocates the original and makes it visible in its relation to the pure language. In de Man's reading, the vessel is always already

broken, or "there was no vessel in the first place" (91), and translation, as a fragment, since "every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original" (91), at best if not at worst, points to "a shattered symbolized" (91), where meaning is always already displaced. Thus for de Man a pure language can be nothing but an "errancy of language," "a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages as such, including and especially the language one calls one's own" (92).¹⁵ But is the crucial concern for translation and the other language one about the dialectical choice between fragments and totality, with totality as the enemy? De Man seems to miss what is really at stake in the deconstruction of translation.

The detour through Jacobs and de Man aims to distinguish Derrida from the American version of deconstruction, in at least three points. First, for him, the problem of the together-ness *and* separated-ness of languages is more subtle than it seems. Second, there is always a political or ethical dimension in Derrida's readings, including his reading of Benjamin, that is nowhere to be found in American deconstruction. But I will begin with the third point, Derrida's strategy of approaching Benjamin. In their readings of

Benjamin on translation, Jacobs and de Man constantly weave their discussions with German-English translations; what they do are exegeses, with a heightened awareness of using interlingual translation to talk about translation. No doubt, Derrida does this, too, but in general he adopts a different strategy. For example, he does not engage the much debated and translated "fragments of a vessel" passage, which almost everyone writing on "Task" makes some comment upon. He does not launch a theoretical exegesis because, as he says, "no theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance."¹⁶ He is well aware of being caught within linguistic systems, where it is precisely the problem of translatability that is at stake, and he is not in a meta-discursive or supra-discursive position to comment "upon" anything. "Theory" is inadequate, not enough to account for the question of translation. Or, more precisely, it is actually about something that is not, or cannot be, *accounted for*, as we will see, that translation becomes a problem. Hence the inadequacy of "theory" or theorization. The only alternative will be to keep on translating, to "attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation" (175). *Mise*

en abyme, in the labyrinths of translations. Thus, without making assertions about what the "original affinity" ("Babel," 201) between languages really is, be it a simple disjunction or a mythical unity-to-come, without trying to determine the nature of it fragmentary or totalizing, Derrida constantly translates Benjamin's interpretations or "translations" of the terms of supplementary connection between languages into something other, in terms of marriage, contract, debt and gift, truth, the sacred, etc., because he is already in the web of detours.

In Benjamin's version of "deconstruction," as read by Derrida, translation is significant in that, often considered secondary in relation to the original, it is translation that brings out the life, the "continued life" or "afterlife" of the original, a conception of life "not limited to organic corporeality" ("Task," 71). As a purposeful manifestation of life, set to express its nature, translation "thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages" ("Task," 72). In this way, translation brings out not only the afterlife of the original but also the communal life, so to speak, or in Derrida's term, "sur-vival" of languages,¹⁷ the "living-on" of languages, or *spectrality*, as he would call it later.¹⁸

Translation cannot bring the "hidden relationship itself" to full presence, "but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form" (72). This hidden relationship is in turn "translated" by Benjamin in terms of "the kinship of languages": "As for the posited central kinship of languages, it is marked by a distinctive convergence. Languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationship, interrelated in what they want to express" (72). There are two things to be noticed here. First, the kinship can not be defined in terms of historical relationship by historical linguistics (the distributionists); thus Benjamin calls it "suprahistorical kinship of languages" (74). In one significant passage, he mentions that, if I really capture what he "means," once the translatability of an original is activated (or, more radically, as the translatability of any original is always already activated), the translation points to the possibility, even unrealized, of being translated into other languages: "For any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents, in regard to specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages" (75). Second, the kinship should not be understood as "the superficial and indefinable

similarity" (73): "kinship does not necessarily involve likeness" (74). It is from this place that Derrida takes a synecdochical move and "translates" kinship into *marriage*, the most "fundamental" kind, indeed the very "ground," of kinship, as Levi-Strauss reminded us many years ago.

But before going into the discussion of marriage and hymen, Derrida also translates kinship of languages into a contract. "How, then, can translation assure the growth --what he [Benjamin] calls 'the hallowed growth'--of languages and the kinship among languages? By trying to fulfill that impossible *contract* to reconstitute, not the original, but *the larger ensemble* that, precisely, is gathered together here in the metaphor of the amphora--the 'metamphora.'" (Italics added)¹⁹ A contract is to be understood in terms of debt and gift, but the translation contract is an "impossible" contract because it is "insolvent" and because no balance will be met. In Derrida's reading, every party involved in the translation is in debt, is indebted--the translator, the original, the sons of Sem who wanted to construct the tower and God as the deconstructor of the tower--but no one is able to return the expenditure, no one can pay one's debt (see "Babel," 176, 182-5). All translations

remain incomplete, nothing consummated. But if everyone involved is indebted, if everyone is asked to give but never enough, there is one that is able to give absolutely, to give expenditure without return. "Pure" or greater language is that which provides the ground of the economy of gift and debt (exchange) but is itself never fully present, can only be glimpsed. Translation thus points to the general *economy of the gift*, the *Es gibt* that *renders* the exchange between languages yet is itself something *beyond exchange*.²⁰ Already in "Task," Benjamin mentions "the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages":

The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter. This nucleus is best defined as the element that does not lend itself to translation. Even when all the surface content has been extracted and transmitted, the primary concern of the genuine translator remains elusive (75).

This crucial passage leads us to marriage, or more precisely, to *hymen*. Marriage is also a contract, and on the other hand marriage promises the continuity of life or "afterlife," thus linking us back to the notions of kinship and "sur-vival." For Derrida, the translation contract is a "hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce the child whose seed will give rise to history and growth" ("Babel," 191). But we know from *Dissemination* that a hymen is the impossibility of signification: it "signifies" both the marriage and virginity, both a membrane and the penetration of a membrane, both *entre* (between, inter-) and *antre* (cave) at the same time; neither this nor that, but both this *and* that, *at the same time*. And it cannot be understood as the Hegelian *Aufhebung*.²¹ In this way, Derrida's translation of kinship into hymen indicates both the possibility and impossibility of the "realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of language" ("Task," 75): it is a promise of consummation, but a promise never reached (See "Babel," 191-2, for details).

This being said, we can "translate" both the relation between the original *and* translation as well as the relation between fragments (the original and the translation) *and* the pure language into hymen. In the indented quotation from

Benjamin in the last page, he says that there is in translation something that is not translatable, but significantly, it is this element that "does not lend itself to translation," this something impossible, this limit, that can "reach this region" of "reconciliation and fulfillment of languages." In other words, it is this untranslatable element that links fragments to the enigmatic pure language. What is that? In the sentences immediately following our indented quotation, Benjamin adds:

Unlike the words of the original, it is not translatable, because the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien (75).

The close link in the original between content and language,

"like the fruit and its skin," is not translatable, like something untouchable, something virginal. And it is this something virginal that is dislocated, disengaged in translation: it is translated but not transferred, not translated in its complete form. Derrida speaks about the "nucleus" that "does not lend itself to translation": "The essential core, that which in the translation is not translatable again, is not the tenor, but the *adherence between the tenor and the language, between the fruit and the skin.* This may seem strange or incoherent (how can a core be situated between the fruit and the skin?)" ("Babel," 193, italics added). This strange, hymenal link becomes "apparent" in translation, for Benjamin has told us that translation can make visible the hidden relationship between languages. About the second metaphor, the royal robe: "The clothes fit but do not cling strictly enough to the royal person. This is not a weakness; the best translation resembles this royal cape. It remains separate from the body to which it is nevertheless conjoined, *wedding it, not wedded to it*" ("Babel," 194, italics added). It is not for nothing that Derrida uses a metaphor of marriage to describe another metaphor. What translation divulges is the hymenal in-between-ness between

content and language, then between different languages: there is no simple disjunction or totality; rather, *languages are combined in their very separated-ness*, as if in the in-between-ness of hymen, in what Jean-Luc Nancy calls the linguistic *partage* (both sharing and dividing, sharing in dividing), sharing voices,²² in singularity.

It is in this "light" that we should read the talks about "truth" and the sacred" in both Benjamin and Derrida. For Benjamin, the pure language is the true language: "For the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language is at work. . . . If there is such a thing as a language of truth, the tensionless and even silent depository of ultimate truth which all thought strives for, then this language of truth is--the true language" ("Task," 77). But he hastens to add that this true language is essentially "concealed in concentrated fashion in translations" (77). Even if there are some kabbalistic connotations in it, Derrida immediately "translates" this true language into the Heideggerian conception of truth (though in its turn the Heideggerian doctrine of truth is not without some theological implications, as some commentators have noted): truth as both concealment *and* unconcealment at the same time,

concealed in its unconcealment (dis-closure, *aletheia*).²³ Rejecting the conception of truth as correspondence or adequation, Derrida proposes: "Truth would be rather the *pure language* in which the meaning and the letter no longer dissociate. If such a place, the taking place of such an event, remained undiscoverable, one could no longer, even by right, distinguish between an original and a translation" ("Babel," 196). They no longer dissociate, not because they form a plenitude, a coherent whole, but rather because in this place they have never been together, or more precisely, they have been *together in their separation*, in the hymenal in-between. This in-between-ness, this something virginal, intact and untouchable in translation, is that which links languages together, in their differences and division, in truth in a radical sense. The same can be said about Derrida's next term in his chain of translation of the original affinity of languages: the sacred. (But unfortunately, I don't think, in this paper, thanks to the limitations of space and time, I can spell out the fascinating issue of the sacred and the sacred text in Benjamin and then in Derrida's reading. Especially in the latter, a Batailleian notion of the sacred is at work, the sacred without

God, and this links it to the crucial problems of sacrifice, communion, communication and *community*. Derrida re-writes Benjamin's reference to the Holy Script and displaces it, subverts it, towards a sacred that is an opening of linguistic and communitarian possibilities.)²⁴

Our traversal of Derrida's chain of translations aims to, as I have said, re-consider the subtle issue of the together-ness *and* separated-ness of languages, to re-mark this problem and to re-write or translate it into the problem of community, something Homi Bhabha mentions at the end of his "DissemiNation" essay in relation to Benjamin's "Task." For a reconsideration of language is already a re-formulation of our thinking about community. Already in "Des Tours de Babel," Derrida mentions the relations between language and community twice:

In seeking to "make a name for themselves," to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a *colonial violence* (since they would

thus universalize their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human *community*. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the *colonial violence* or the *linguistic imperialism*.

(174, italics

mine)

This is the first passage, and in the second passage, when he talks about how the translation contract differs from ordinary language and social contract, he says the social contract "which binds a community" (185) is in fact within the larger contract, the "absolute" contract which makes possible all the contracts. By implication, Derrida is thinking about how community becomes possible, just like, in re-thinking or re-translating the problem of the affinity of languages, he is in fact thinking about the political dimension of languages. For him, the pure language is "the language itself as a Babelian event, a language that is not the universal language in the Leibnizian sense . . . ; it is the being-language of the language, tongue or language *as such*, that unity without self-identity, which makes

for the fact that there are languages, and that they are languages" (201). This is one of the most Heideggerian moments in Derrida's writing, in the fashion of Heideggerian ontological difference between Being and beings: the pure language, never present in the full sense, is what makes possible all languages, and we can only glimpse it, in Blanchot's term, through an Orpheus' gaze. In a similar way, through his translations-interpretations of Benjamin's difficult text, we can begin to think about the being-community of community in languages, especially in translations, where, as Benjamin reminds us, we can have a glimpse of "the plurality of languages" ("Task," 82) and necessarily turn the "plurality" into "dissemination." We can re-mark the hymenal together-ness in separation, or being-in-common in difference, in terms of both language and community, in terms of, perhaps, "unavowable community" or "inoperative community."²⁵

To think through the in-between-ness opened up by translations moves us towards the edges of communities, towards a community that can not be understood in the ordinary sense of the word, a community, whether "unavowable" (because avowal would mean substantial consolidation) or

"inoperative" (*desoeuvre*, because work or production would mean immanent presence, which in turn points to the disappearance of "sharing" of the "being-in-common"), which is the interruption of all communities. But if we can read in Benjamin both a theological tendency towards the whole and a dispersed together-ness, we can also find in Derrida a disturbing duality. We see the references to colonial violence and linguistic imperialism, but we also see how he mentions God, the sacred and the law. Of course we know when he uses these words he is working on reversal-displacement operations of these terms, as an attempt to re-write the language of the metaphysics of presence; it is a homeopathic strategy to tease out the crack in the other. For example, when he is writing about the "law" of translation, he is not trying to locate a law or norm in the ordinary sense of the word. Rather, he attempts to break open the very heterogeneous nature of the law. Here, in the case of the translation, the "law" is: *you must translate, but, at the same time, you cannot translate*; you cannot not translate. This is the law of law in the double bind, it is *aporetic law*. Deconstruction *is* translation. To reach the being-in-common of languages, you must translate,

in order to "communicate," as it were, to see the other within you, *yet* you can never reach the end of translation, because there can never be a complete transference, translation interminable.

To-be-translated-ness in the future-perfect is exactly the "law" of language: the original is already translation or will have been translated, given the translatability operational in languages, given "the non-identity with itself of all language."²⁶ Seemingly secondary to the original language, translation as the originary condition of language is in fact that which always precedes the original, so to speak. In Heidegger's words, "To speak and to say is in itself translation, the essence of which can by no means be divided without *remainder* into those where translating and translated words belong to different languages. In every dialogue and in every soliloquy an original translation holds sway."²⁷ I have already mentioned this a bit earlier: there is always remainder or residue (*reste*), something not entirely translatable, in translation. Froment-Meurice thus comments upon the "strange collusion" between Heidegger and Benjamin: "[T]ranslation exists from the beginning, and it is precisely this *original* translation that constitutes the

untranslatability of the original. 'From the beginning' means that there is translation in the original itself and that is why translation does not simply move from one language to another; it begins in language 'proper,' or the 'mother' tongue. Translation begins precisely as soon as *it is to be said*, and that is never entirely sayable."²⁸

Translation is therefore its own impossibility and possibility, at the same time. In the same way, when we consider the being-community of community, or communities, we also reach the opening and the limit of community. But this community is impossible, for it urges us to re-mark the problematic legitimacy of all claims to community. This very Kantian (or Heideggerian in the Kantian sense) attempt should be modified by Derrida's earlier remarks about colonial violence and linguistic imperialism, because while knowing the heterogeneous may be important, it is more important how, within this law, to know how the power-structure is deployed in its meticulous details in various communities. At this juncture, for lack of more "concrete" interventions into the postcolonial condition, it may be useful to return to Homi Bhabha, to see how Benjamin's notion of the necessity and impossibility of translation

within/between the fissures of languages (the necessity *and* the impossibility that are the Other language) may contribute to cultural criticism:

Living in the interstices of Lucretius and Ovid, caught in-between a "nativist," even nationalist, atavism and a postcolonial metropolitan assimilation, the subject of cultural difference becomes a problem that Walter Benjamin has described as irresolution, or liminality, or "translation," the *element of resistance* in the process of transformation, "that element in a translation which does not lend itself to translation." This space of difference at the interstices is infused with that Benjaminian temporality of the present which makes graphic a moment of transition, not merely the continuum of historyThe migrant culture of the "in-between," the minority position, dramatizes the activity of culture's untranslatability²⁹

This is to read the migrant as the figure of translated-translating globality; the migrant is constantly in translation, yet resistant to being translated, between communities and between languages. Do we have here *untranslatability as constitutive of negative identity*? In the grand story of the Babel *and* already in our everyday utterances, we can see the "nucleus" or the very beginning of "globalization as translation," the ever expansive trend to homogenize and its inevitable failure which in its turn rouses the attempts at homogenization again. Indeed, we will have to understand globalization, at both its limit and opening, for both its terror and pleasure, in terms of translation. A cluster of recent publications has tried to tackle the translation of cultural difference in various instances,³⁰ and we can clearly read in them an ever-expanding space. From the very beginning, from the Babelian confusion of tongues among the sons of Sem, to their families, to communities, to countries and nations, to the world, to the other worlds, and now moving to the globe in globality, the task of the translator has to be translated to adjust to the changing space, in order to read *global difference*, rather than just cultural difference. A critic thus translates Benjamin's

task to address the issue of multiculturalism: "The task of the translator consists not of making language pure translatable, but of leading it to the limit at which meaning takes flight without completely dissipating and at which difference ceases to assert itself without simply disappearing. Translation rouses the memory of letting-be in difference . . ." ³¹ For translation to take into account multiculturalism, multinationalism, polyethnic states and transnationality, I would say, in a Derridean fashion of ethical operation, that in the *face* of global difference the task of the translator in the era of globalization cannot be other than an over-task, an over-duty, a surplus or excess of duty, to respond to the *spacing* of the other.

Notes

¹ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973; first published in Great Britain in 1970, by Jonathan Cape Ltd.), p. 257 and p. 263. I am using the British edition, which follows the first American edition (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968) and which still contains the first half of "Max Brod's Book on Kafka" (excluded from the 2nd American edition, Schocken, 1978); the page numbers here after the first Kafka essay therefore differ from

those in the current American edition by two pages. Page numbers will follow subsequent quotations from the translation in Fontana edition.

- ² Several recent essays on Benjamin specifically address the question of "destruction," see the collection *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 1994).
- ³ Homi K. Bhabha, "How newness enters the world: Postmodern space, postcolonial times and the trial of cultural translation," in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 227-8; the quotation in the next sentence comes from the same page; see also p. 224.
- ⁴ Carol Jacobs, "The Monstrosity of Translation," *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 90 (1975), No. 6, p. 756. Page numbers will follow subsequent quotations from this text. Jacobs' essay has been collected in her *In the Language of Walter Benjamin* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 75-90.
- ⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon N. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 192.
- ⁶ Richard Macksey, "Introduction: The Deserted Museum," *MLN*, Vol. 90 (1975), No. 6, p. 735; cf. de Man: "[I]n the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text," in Paul de Man, "'Conclusions': Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'," *The Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 73. Page numbers will follow subsequent quotation from de Man's text.
- ⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and margins of the modern nation," in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p.320; also in *The Location of Culture*, p. 170.
- ⁸ Cf. Harry Zohn's translation in *Illuminations*, p. 78.

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- ⁹ Gershom Scholem, "Walter Benjamin and His Angel," in *On Walter Benjamin*, ed. Gary Smith (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988), p. 84; see also Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 121: here Scholem asserts that "Task" represents Benjamin's thought in the period between 1924-6, "during which his approach to the philosophy of language was openly theological in orientation."
- ¹⁰ Of course there can be several, and even rival, interpretations of Benjamin's notion of "redemption": besides Scholem's kabbalistic one: see Jurgen Habermas, "Consciousness-raising or Redemptive Criticism," in *New German Critique*, No. 17, 1979 [Special Walter Benjamin Issue], pp. 30-59; also, in a different translation, in *On Walter Benjamin and Habermas' Philosophical-Political Profiles* (MIT Press, 1983). Richard Wolin applies Habermas' interpretation to his *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), see p. xiii and pp. 48-63.
- ¹¹ Wolin, p. 37.
- ¹² Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmond Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: Verso, 1979), p. 111. Page numbers will follow subsequent quotations from this text.
- ¹³ Rodolphe Gasche, "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language," in Rainer Nagele, ed. *Benjamin's Ground: New Readings of Walter Benjamin* (Detroit, IL: Wayne State University Press, 1988), p. 88. See also Michael W. Jennings, *Dialectical Images: Walter Benjamin's Theory of Literary Criticism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), pp.93-104.
- ¹⁴ For an example of de Man's "deconstructive" reading of metaphor/metonymy reversal-displacement, see *Allegories of*

Reading (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979), pp. 14-9.

- ¹⁵ Susan A. Handelman, situated between kabbalistic tradition and modern literary theory, takes both Jacobs and de Man to task for a "nihilistic view of language and history," and especially for de Man's "blindness to and obliteration of the Jewishness in Benjamin." For her, Benjamin tried to "revise Kantianism by reconnecting thought to language" and he "sharply disagreed with Saussure's concept of language as a set of signs whose meanings are arbitrary. For Benjamin, language and the 'literary' were repositories of truth, even though that truth might be at present inaccessible; this was a 'theological' messianic component, nowhere to be found in semiotics and structuralism." See her *Fragments of Redemption: Jewish Thought and Literary Theory in Benjamin, Scholem, and Levinas* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1991), pp.38-9; notice also that in p. 30, Handelman bases her discussion of the "fragments of a vessel" passage on Zohn's translation ("Task," 78).
- ¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Des Tours de Babel," tr. Joseph F. Graham, in Joseph F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985), p. 175. Page numbers will follow subsequent quotations from this text.
- ¹⁷ For the notion of "sur-vivre," see Jacques Derrida, "Living on/Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, H. Bloom et al (New York: Continuum, 1984), pp. 75-176
- ¹⁸ See Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- ¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Roundtable on Translation," in Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald, trans. Peggy Kamuf

(New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 123.

- ²⁰ I will have to deal with this complicated issue elsewhere. For an insightful discussion of the relation of translation to the gift, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Translation as Culture," *parallax* 14 (January-March 2000) (Special Issue on "translator's ink): 15.
- ²¹ Cf. Jacques Derrida, "The Double Session," in *Dissemination* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 212; Derrida here proposes a move from "the logic of palisade" to "the logic of hymen": "To repeat: the hymen, the confusion between the present and the non-present, along with all the indifferences it entails within the whole series of opposites (perception/non-perception, memory/image, memory/desire, etc.), produces the effect of a medium It is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites 'at once.' What counts here is the between, the in-between-ness of the hymen. The hymen 'takes place' in the 'inter-,' in the spacing between desire and fulfillment, between perpetration and its recollection. But this medium of the entre has nothing to do with a center."
- ²² Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Alan Schrift (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989); see also Gayatri Spivak, "Bonding in Difference," in *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistic Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 273-85.
- ²³ The notion of truth as unconcealment/concealment comes from Heidegger's interpretive translation of "aletheia," see, among others, his "Plato's Doctrine of Truth," in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); and "Aletheia," in *Early Greek Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).
- ²⁴ See, among others, Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1989); *The*

Accursed Share, Vol. I, Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988); "The Sacred," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 240-5.

²⁵ Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Station Hill, 1988); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, ed. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); also Nancy, "Of Being-in-Common," in *Community at Loose End*, ed. Miami Theory Collective (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 65.

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, quoted in Marc Froment-Meurice, *That Is To Say: Heidegger's Poetics*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 37; *Italics mine*.

²⁸ Froment-Meurice, p. 37.

²⁹ Homi Bhabha, "How newness enters the world," in *The Location of Culture*, p. 224.

³⁰ For example, Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); Lydia H. Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, eds., *The Translatability of Cultures: Figurations of the Space Between* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

³¹ Alexander Garcia Duttman, "On Translatability," *Qui Parle*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Fall/Winter 1994: 41.