

In the Workshop of the Translator Walter Benjamin in/on Translation

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Abstract Taking as its starting point Walter Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*, the paper provides insights on both his theory of translation and some of the translations of this essay. In doing so, the author lets the readers enter both Benjamin's and her translator's workshop. This process leads to a reflection at a metalevel on the dialectical tension between translator and translation, highlighting a hiatus between the experience of translating and the process of thinking about it. Translation emerges as a process of metamorphosis that lets the original survive in new forms, making us aware that the concept of an absolute singularity does not have any reason to exist, both for works of art and for our life. Thus, translation offers a privileged observation-point from which to reflect upon the concept of "life", subverting one of the most stable categories of Western philosophy, one which is often taken for granted: the concept of subjectivity. Through the concept and the practice of translation, we become aware that every text, as every existence, is the result of a series of encounters and collisions and should therefore be considered only from the dimension of plurality.

Keywords Difference. Hybridisation. Plurality. Translation's theory. Translation's practice.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2022-12-05
Accepted 2022-12-12
Published 2022-12-20

Open access

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Citation Costa, M.T. (2022). "In the Workshop of the Translator. Walter Benjamin in/on Translation". *JoLMA. The Journal for the Philosophy of Language, Mind and the Arts*, 3(2), 213-222.

DOI 10.30687/JoLma/2723-9640/2022/02/004

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Not long ago, I found myself driving a car that was not mine in a city that was not my own. I switched on the radio. A famous translator was speaking about her work.¹ Intrigued by what she had to say while she was already quoting an author, I suddenly felt part of the story that she was telling. “I think that it should be in the library of every translator, other than in his/her memory”, affirmed the translator. Even more curious, I waited until she revealed the book about which she was speaking. It was a novel by an Italian author, Michele Mari, entitled *The Black Arrow* (2009), where a child (perhaps the young author) is speaking in the first person. He narrates how, after having completed the reading of a book by Robert Louis Stevenson in its Italian translation, he received as a present by his father a second copy of the book. Being in awe of his father, the child doesn’t reveal to him that he has already read the book, starting therefore to feel guilty and somehow ill at ease, until he suddenly realizes that the book covers are different. The child hurries up to open the books, looking for their incipit and notices with exultation that the two incipits do not coincide and thus initiate two different stories, respectively: “Nel pomeriggio di una tarda primavera le campane della fortezza di Moat House risuonarono a un’ora insolita” and “In un pomeriggio di primavera ormai inoltrata, le campane del castello di Moat-House suonarono a un’ora strana”.² “At this point”, says the child “I was safe”.

The simple remark of the difference between the two Italian translations of Steveson’s book is what lets the child feel safe, and, together with him, every translator. Translation can thus have “salvific” effects. And this simply because a translation in the singular form doesn’t exist, but only translations in the plural exist.

Some translations grow out of the ones that preceded them, but not in order to correct them. Languages are living beings in constant metamorphosis and, by virtue of translations, the so-called originals can “survive”. This concept brings us to Walter Benjamin’s oeuvre, and in particular to what he states on the concept of “survival” in his well-known essay *The Task of the Translator* (*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzters*) (cf. Benjamin 1991a; 2017; English translation: Benjamin 2004).

Before facing this topic, I would like to further dwell on the threshold of the text (or perhaps, instead of “to dwell”, it would be more appropriate to use the German verb *zögern*, which is even

¹ The translator, Susanna Basso, was recalling her book *Sul tradurre. Esperienze e divagazioni militanti* (Basso 2010).

² “In the afternoon of a late spring the bells of Moat House fort resounded at an unusual hour” and “In an afternoon of an already late spring, the bells of Moat-House castle rang at a strange hour” (Author’s transl.).

more permeated by the coexistence of movement and stop typical of thresholds). *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, one of Benjamin's most philosophical texts, was written as an introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* one hundred years ago, between 1921 and 1923. Hundred years after Benjamin's publication and sixty years after Renato Solmi's well-known Italian translation (cf. Benjamin 1991c), I am working on a new translation of the essay with a critical apparatus (cf. Costa 2023) Benjamin's text was written as a forward, but it does not have an introductory function to Baudelaire's book, which is not even quoted in Benjamin's essay. *The Task of the Translator* deals with the topic of translation and, in particular, of literary translation. There is a hiatus between translation and discourse on translation. Benjamin wants to show us that there is a deep abyss between the theory and practice of translation, or better between thinking and experiencing translation. This hiatus is revealed by Benjamin's writing which deals with translation without offering any concrete examples.

The essay's title contains between its letters the signature of this hiatus. The central theme here is not the figure of the translator, but rather the translation itself. Writing a premise without any introductory function and a title that do not refer to the text that enunciates it, Benjamin shows a dialectical tension between translator and translation, between the experience of translating and the process of thinking about it (cf. Berman 2008, 35). Through this rhetorical device, he distances himself from traditional treatises on the topic, offering a critical redefinition of the translation. As that tradition underpins, its task (*Aufgabe*) is also not a mere transferal of meanings. Neither it has to do with the ethic sphere of responsibility. It is neither matter of responsibility nor of obligations. The German verb *aufgeben* indicates, on the one hand, the idea of giving (*geben*), of fulfilling, of executing a task; on the other hand, it implies the idea of renouncing, of giving up, of closing, for instance in its extreme use in the expression *seinen Gast aufgeben*, which is synonymous with "to die". The word *Aufgabe* is therefore characterized by this very polarity. Associated with the term "translation", it almost indicates a task whose outcome is uncertain. In Benjamin's use, it recalls the realm of the German Romanticism, where the term *Aufgabe* was strictly related to the term *Auflösung* (solution), to be intended seemingly as a logical, chemical and musical solution. In the German Romanticism, the dialectic between task and solution is played out in four ambits where the language 'fulfils' or realizes itself: philosophy; poetry; critics; and translation (cf. Novalis 1954, 22. On this topic cf. Berman 2008, 41). Benjamin is looking for a "solution" in the order of language, a solution to the original dissonance which is inherent to the sphere of language. In particular, he aims to critically redefine translation, differentiating it from poetry and critique.

But let's go back to the concept of survival. Following Benjamin, the link between an original and its translation is a bound of life, or better of afterlife (*Zusammenhang des Überlebens*).³ The German term *Zusammenhang* is a common term, but it contains a clue, the signature of the liminal space which – as we will see in the next pages – is the dwelling of the translation: the space “in-between” can be experienced only together (*zusammen*), it is a common space, a space of *mélange*, of hybridization (cf. Costa 2012). Translation is the “form” that the original acquires in its metamorphosis (cf. Benjamin 1991a, 9). In this sense, the figure of echo – one of the many metaphors that recur in Benjamin's text – reveals itself as decisive in order to understand the core of Benjamin's concept of translation.⁴

The echo is a complex figure of resonance that cannot be reduced to the repetition of a stable entity. It deals with a process of transferring that occurs *through* and *via* resistance. This structure seems to be paradoxical, in that the translation highlights that the concept of an absolute singularity does not have any reason to exist, both for works of art and for our life. It is exactly in this passage that the essential relation – that should not be intended in a metaphorical sense (cf. Benjamin 1991a, 11) – between translation and life arises. I think that this essential link has offered Benjamin a privileged observation-point from which to reflect upon the concept of “life,” thus subverting one of the most stable categories of Western philosophy, one which is often taken for granted: the concept of subjectivity. Languages are not simply more longeval than human beings, but also more malleable and subjected to metamorphosis.

A ‘surplus of life’ stands in opposition to the mortality of both author and reader, which Benjamin defines as afterlife (*Überleben*), and which confines the works, together with their languages, to a posthumous and migrating existence. Benjamin employs only once the term *Überleben*, and uses in the following section the term *Fortleben*. In introducing the concept of survival, he chooses the term *Überleben*, since this term express the idea of a surplus, whereas *Fortleben* alludes to a mere temporal prosecution, a transformation (cf. Berman 2008, 86). One should also not forget here the use that one of Benjamin's contemporary, Aby Warburg, made of the concept of survival as *Nachleben* (cf. Warburg 1999).

The language remains, states Benjamin, but it is in constant movement. From this perspective, it is not so important who the author

³ Cf. Berman 2008, 86. The influence of Jewish thought through Scholem's mediation is evident here. The “messianic” aspect of translation is also at the center of Derrida's reading of Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator*. Cf. Derrida 1985; 1987, 203-35.

⁴ For a reading of Benjamin's *The Task of the Translator* through the figure of echo cf. Costa 2012, 25-40. On translation as echo cf. also: Nägele 1997, 10.

of a text is, since beyond every signature, every text is the result of a series of encounters and impressions that originate from a plural being (*Pluralwesen*).

Every change, every metamorphosis, takes place through the repetition of something original, which should not be intended as a model to be imitated or reproduced (that is, reading translation as a search for equivalences between languages). A good translation is rather able to keep the balance between languages; it is the form according to which “a foreign work reaches us as foreign. In approaching and making accessible the work to us, the good translation maintains this element of foreignness” (Berman 1984, 200; Author’s transl.). Thus, we are not dealing with a mere transfer of meaning where the smallest amount is lost, as a long tradition argued and still argues.

The act of translating is not a linear path, but contains constant interruptions, caesura, deviations, inaccessible zones, which sometimes limit the way. Every translation is like a process of giving birth, with the pain and discomfort associated with it. Together with its translator, a translation should be prepared to host the ‘other’, without being afraid of entering in the life of languages, in their metamorphosis, therefore allowing the process to alter the translation itself.

The act of translating can not only strengthen the so-called source-language, but also rejuvenate and rebirth the translation’s own language. The translator should act exactly where the original language is more foreign to itself and resistant to every change, where it shows harshness and points of apparent untranslatability, where it is more discontinuous and fragmented. It is precisely in these dark zones that constellations and unnoticed correspondences appear. The translator should listen to their feeble echo, without wanting to prevaricate it.

A good translation should not give the impression that it sounds as an original in its language, but on the contrary it should play in a continuous oscillation between proximity and distance, between similarity and dissimilarity.

All these images seem to allude to the aforementioned “life relationship” (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*) or “survival relationship” (*Überleben*). They show that in the transition from one language to another always remains something else, a surplus, something that precedes, a *Vor-leben*. Even if periods of latency were to succeed, languages would survive in a particular and diminished form, as *Nach-leben*. In this sense, one can claim that every language contains traces of what has preceded it. These traces remain mostly invisible, because they have assumed the form of oblivion – and in oblivion, as Benjamin teaches us, things appear distorted and unrecognizable.

The translator finds then his/her place in the segment in which a language transforms itself in another one, without the possibility to determine with certainty where is the border between the two. It is not about the passage from one language to another, but about the

crossing of a threshold characterized by blurred limits. The translator leaves it open for acting on it. The figure of the threshold is one of a dynamic cesura, which enables the source-text to come into collision with the target-text. From a logical point of view, one should not even speak about a source- and a target-text, because this would bring us to a linear and progressive concept of temporality. The time of translation is instead discontinuous, mixed, hybrid, because texts and languages are constantly subjected to metamorphosis.

After these premises, how should we translate Benjamin's texts? It would be unadvisable to offer both a literal and a free translation. Coming after a rich number of translations, I obviously insert my work in a well-established tradition of translation practices. If I look at this scenario from the outside, I notice that French translations situate themselves in the wake of the tradition of the *belles infidèles*, which bend the German text to a flowing French that avoids any repetition; English translations aim to communicate in the clearest manner a complex content, which is difficult to understand; Italian, Castilian, Catalan and Brazilian-Portuguese works seem to insert themselves in an intermediate way, which aims neither to distort Benjamin's text, nor to make it more accessible, but rather to show its complexity. I have selected this latter way, in line with the idea that a translation practice is a "repatriating bewilderment", a dipping in the shared water of the life of languages, in order to emerge as a different person. With time, my goal is to develop the so called "patience" of the translator. In this process, I wait for words to come to me, making myself listen to them. Enmeshed in this process, at times I notice that what Benjamin stated in quoting Hugo von Hofmannstahl about immaterial similarities (*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeiten*)⁵ can happen in real life: "To read what it never was written (*Was nie geschrieben wurde, lesen*)".⁶ What does this quote mean? I would suggest to it as "do not rush in identifying correspondences", because our memory is sometimes able to put us in a disorienting situation of *déjà-vu*, in which we remember something that we did not experience in person.

Before concluding, I would like to approach the text directly. I am referring here to a critical passage, in the eleventh paragraph of *The Task of the Translator*, which is in the second-last sentence before the conclusion. Here, Benjamin offers a definition of the translator's task, using the term *Umdichtung*, which recurs only twice in Benjamin's oeuvre, respectively in the essay *The Task of the Transla-*

⁵ Cf. Benjamin 1991b; 1991e; Bernofsky 2001; Finkelde 2003; Gebauer, Wulf 1998; Kleiner 1980; Menninghaus 1995; Opitz 2000; S. Weigel 1997; 2001.

⁶ Benjamin quotes this passage coming from H. von Hofmannsthal's *Der Tor und der Tod* in *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (cf. Benjamin 1991e) and in the preparatory notes to the text *On the concept of history* (cf. Benjamin 1991d, cf. also the note by the editors at page 1238). On this quotation cf. Costa 2006.

tor, and in a letter to Gershom Scholem from 27 April 1925, referring to Calderon de la Barca. This term is extremely difficult to translate in the Italian language.

Below is the original text in German:

Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. (Benjamin 1991a, 19; 2017, 23 line 5)

Here is the text in Roberto Solmi's Italian translation:

Redimere nella propria quella pura lingua che è racchiusa in un'altra; o, prigioniera nell'opera, liberarla nella traduzione – è questo il compito del traduttore. (Benjamin 1991c, 50)

And here in my translation:

Redimere nella propria quella pura lingua, che è esiliata in una lingua straniera, prigioniera dell'opera, e liberarla "ripoetandola" [*Umdichtung*] è il compito del traduttore. (Benjamin 2023, forthcoming)

As the reader can see, in Solmi's translation the term *Umdichtung* disappears, as it is rendered with "traduzione" (translation). But how can a term that for Benjamin was so precious that he employed it only twice in his work be omitted and instead substituted by "translation"? If one reads only the second part of the text, one can infer that: "Liberare (la pura lingua) nella traduzione è il compito della traduzione".⁷ But how should it be freed? What is the power of translation?

The sonority of the term *Umdichtung* leads us to think of Heidegger's *Dichtung*, that is, to the interplay of light and shadow which is proper to a clearing. Benjamin would probably not have appreciated this digression. But what I want to express here is that we find ourselves again in front of the dimension of plurality. On the one side, Benjamin suggests that translation (or better, translations) enables the original to be re-born, to come back to life in another form; on the other side, when translating Benjamin's text, one becomes aware that no translation can be the definitive one, thus bringing us back to the 'salvific' function of translation.

⁷ "To free the pure language in the translation is the task of the translation" (Author's transl.).

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