TRANSLATION AS AESTHETIC RESISTANCE: PARATRANSLATING WALTER BENJAMIN

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ABSTRACT: This essay is a brief study of translation as a practice of aesthetic resistance seen from a historical and philosophical perspective. Translation is perceived as the process of transition and negotiation within the 'third space' between various different hybrid cultural contexts and their discursive constraints, and referred to as 'paratranslation'. It summarizes the first attempts to think of translation as an almost 'holistic' paradigm and the aesthetics of intervention from Romantic philosophy onwards. It attempts to show how Walter Benjamin's master narrative, the utopia of 'pure language', encourages continuous resistance to the totalitarianism of the idea of the 'original', to aesthetics (within the sense of the perception of the real) and to dominant discourses. It subsequently defines the idea of 'progress', which considers translation as aesthetic resistance, as a process of construction in constant deconstruction. It concludes by exemplifying the notion of translation as a paradigm of intervention in modernity with a brief analysis of the transcreation performed by Erin Mouré on Fernando Pessoa/Alberto Caeiro's poetic cycle, *O Guardador de Rebanhos* (The Keeper of Sheep).

KEYWORDS Resistance, aesthetics, philosophy of translation, paratranslation, Walter Benjamin, pure language, Erin Mouré, Fernando Pessoa

Categories such as *nation*, *society* or *culture* could today be considered as 'translation zones.'[1] It seems to already be commonly accepted that translations, in addition to basic linguistic transference, also rewrite their respective contexts. Whereas during the 18th and 19th centuries translation was still a national issue, since the end of the 20th century it has evolved into an increasingly cultural, transnational and trans-social dynamic. All experience is in itself a translation, as it is, for instance, the construction of a sense of oneself from the idea of a cultural community—that is, an imagined community (which is, in itself, already a construction or translation).

However, we must not confuse culture with politics. There is an ongoing trend of the concept of *culture* to pervade virtually everything, be it the economy, the power of institutions or the actual psychological structure of the subject. For over two decades,

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1. Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone*, Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2006.

Gayatri Spivak has been drawing attention to the fact that culturalization—as promoted by postmodernism, postcolonialism and cultural studies—has led to the depoliticization of academic theory.[2] However, this culturalization should not be considered as a social fact, but as a symptom of a methodology imposed by a privileged Western system, which is primarily concerned with controlling the canonical definitions of cultural identities, science, art, etc. To counter this discourse, Spivak has proposed the practice of 'strategic essentialism' (SE) that, without having to resort to exaggeration, seeks to save a certain element of the subject and/or collective resilience as far as dominant discourses are concerned.

Resistance, unlike processes of adaptation or assimilation, refers to the historical conflict of power and the translation of the real; but also to premeditated denial as a desire to change reality and attempt the critical recovery (both mythological and archaeological) of a past from different historical presents. Moreover, the context of resistance and translation evokes the difficulty and, at the same time, the need to step outside the restrictiveness of the paradigms and historical presents. And, last but not least, it refers to the already ongoing abolition of the myth of the original which is increasingly turning into a historical ruin of sorts, which the translator, *qua* historical agent, crosses unsteadily and in constant danger of self-deception.[3]

When speaking of the relation between resistance and aesthetics from a European perspective, we must call to mind Peter Weiss's *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*.[4] This unclassifiable literary hybridization, part novel, autobiography and history of the labour movements in Germany between 1918 and 1945, and part treatise on aesthetics, revived the quarrels between Marxist aesthetics (Lukács) and an open conceptualization of the work of art (Brecht and Benjamin), favouring the latter. However, the main interest of this text for the present day lies in its aspiration to 'transform aesthetics as a tool of knowledge of cultural processes into an instrument of intervention'.[5] There is certainly a great need for 'instruments of intervention' in today's world: who would not agree that we are currently witnessing a colonialist Western civilization, which is imposing and multiplying mechanized habits around the world? Such globalization, which is characterized as negative and devalues everything that might be considered a culture of content, ideas and utopias, cynically instrumentalizes all prospective concepts like *progress*, *development* or *education*.

It is within this context of 'global culture'—not only that relating to the economic, but also that which invades and subordinates virtually all the micro-cultural internal processes of our daily lives—that translation dynamics (of identities, bodies, tastes, etc.)

2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing Historiography' [1985], in D. Landry and G. MacLean (eds.), *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, New York, Routledge, 1996, pp. 203-35.

3. See also Boris Buden, 'Cultural Translation: Why It Is important and Where to Start With It', 2006, http://translate.eipcp.net/transversal/0606/buden/en.

4.Peter Weiss, *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*, 3 vols., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1981.

5. Peter Weiss, *Notizbücher. 1971–1980 / Notizbücher. 1960–1971*, 2 vols., Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1981-82, p. 817 (my translation).

reveal their great potential for resistance; but how can such a broad meaning of the term 'translation' be circumscribed? Is it the case that we can describe and analyse all the phenomena of life and culture from a perspective of translation? Of course, we are still far from being able to provide exhaustive answers to such fundamental questions (I have already tried elsewhere to provide a guide to the absorption capacity of this polymorphous concept).[6] Translation is a constantly moving process of transposition without a fixed location and, in a wider sense of the term, it is a form of transcultural knowledge. An open and almost 'holistic' concept of translation includes all of its contexts and conditions, that is to say, what one might refer to as 'paratranslation'. Translation and paratranslation form an interdisciplinary space where not only deculturization and vulgarization, but also resistance, cross-breeding and hybridization are carried out constantly and at an increasingly global level.[7]

Paratranslation might be understood as an allostatic phenomenon of cultural dynamics. Allostasis, literally maintaining stability (or homeostasis) through change, describes how the cardiovascular system adjusts to the resting and active states of the body. I hold that this notion of 'stability through change' is also inherent to cultural transformations. Here, I shall limit myself to a brief study of what it is that enables translation to be intrinsically considered as a practice of aesthetic resistance—from a historical and philosophical perspective—and I will conclude with a brief example from poetry.

Within a sociocultural context I understand translation, and paratranslation as its inevitable double, as a blending or reworking of *Weltanschauungen*,[8] the analysis of which may lead us to a more complete lifting of constraints on knowledge and, more specifically, to a 'phenomenology of becoming'.[9] How do we translate what happens to us? Where do we find the categories to integrate (read: 'to translate') phenomena in our mental universe? What does translation mean within the context of cultural heritage? How do we resist what a system imposes on us through the practice of translation? The yet unaccomplished ethics of translation, to which these questions lead, lies in the idea of a subject (or even of a community) that has to learn to control the multiplicity of itself and to translate itself continuously. Within this process, translation also acquires a political dimension: America, Europe, a religion, an aesthetic idea or a political ideology, for example, will only persist as meaningful entities if they allow and practice translations of themselves. The dynamics of translation is a being and becoming, where each is at the service of the other, and in which identity is co-defined by submission to and ownership of the other. This 'being for the other' and 'being in the other' is much of what could be termed the philosophy of translation: one is a

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6. See Burghard Baltrusch, 'É todo tradución? Elementos socioculturais, neurocientíficos e meméticos para unha teoría holística da para/tradución', *Viceversa: Revista Galega de Tradución*, no. 12, 2006, pp. 9-38; Burghard Baltrusch and Gabriel Pérez Durán, 'Na orografía do mudable. Cara a uns Estudos de Tradución & Paratradución', B. Baltrusch and G. Pérez Durán (eds.), *Soldando Sal. Galician Studies in Translation and Paratranslation*, Munich, Martin Meidenbauer Verlag, 2010, pp. 9-33.

7. See Baltrusch/Pérez Durán, NODM, 19.

8. Editor's note: 'Weltanschauung' can be loosely translated as 'world view' or 'philosophy of life'.

9. Alexis Nouss, *Plaidoyer pour un monde métis*, Paris, Les Éditions Textuel, 2005, p. 29.

person (i.e. the meeting point of various cultural influences, for instance) informed by and within the other.

Our history has been and remains a constant blending of the self and the other; it is my language as a 'prosthesis of origin' and meeting point of the 'monolingualisms' of others.[10] The very instance of translation is the space prior to the fixing of identities; it is a third language that acts as a transmission chain, so flexible and subject to wear and tear, that there will always remain traces (Derrida) in what is transmitted. These traces refer to the translator as a mixed subjectivity, nowadays less foreign than (im)migrant or refugee. These migrations are translations from one culture to another, between one discourse and another, between one *Weltanschauung* and another, without abandoning the source culture, and thus even becoming a form of diplomacy. The questioning task and critical translation of modernity demands models and perspectives that are mixed and migrant, capable of providing translations into and of themselves. In these models it is no longer *the work* that is prevalent, but rather *texts*; there is no longer *language* but rather *cultures*; it is no longer *faith* that is operational but rather *ideologies*; there is no longer *information* to be conceived but rather *knowledge*; and what can be located is no longer *the author* or *the translator*, but rather *transcreators* and *mediators*; just as it is no longer *the production of knowledge* that is operational, but rather the ongoing *change of knowledge*.

However, my main intention is to look back at certain key aspects of the history of what might be called the philosophy of translation. One of the first attempts in the modern era to think of translation as an almost holistic paradigm and aesthetics of intervention was that of Romantic philosophy. Starting from a pronounced desire for innovation, German Romanticism came to relate poetry and resistance through translation. Friedrich Schleiermacher characterized art as an interpretation of reality, as an endless task, since the number of people interpreting it was potentially infinite, and according to the Romantic perspective, it is precisely through the authority of the interpreter that the work of art reflects history. Friedrich Schlegel extended this idea to translation: 'Translation is an indeterminate, endless task'[11] and as 'poets and artists […] seek to represent the representation of the new', critique and translation 'want to recreate what has already been created'.[12] Thus, translation has been elevated to a 'progressive universal poetry' with the 'complete appropriation of the classical enabling its widest dissemination'.[13] What inspired this revolutionary revaluation of translation was the notion of the proximity between poetry and philosophy, that is, the conviction that philosophy is a result of the conflict between poetry and *praxis*. Schlegel even concluded that this transversal conflict made the existence of pure poetry or philosophy

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10. Jacques Derrida, *O monolinguismo do outro ou a Prótese de Origem*, trans. Fernanda Bernardo, Porto, Campo das Letras, (1996) 2001.

11. Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, vol. 2, 10 vols., E. Behler *et al.* (eds.), Paderborn / Darmstadt / Zürich, Schöningh, 1958, p. 15.

12. Friedrich Schlegel, *'Über Goethes Meister', Kritische und theoretische Schriften*, A. Huyssen (ed.), Stuttgart, Reclam, 1978, pp. 157-58.

13. Friedrich Schlegel, 'Philosophie der Philologie', *Logos*, no. 17, J. Körner (ed.), 1928, pp. 1-72, p. 50.

impossible. About a century and a half later, post-structuralism ended up extending this relativism to all master narratives, suggesting notions like anti-totalitarianism, anti-foundationalism or anti-essentialism.

So when we conceive of the resistance to a certain aesthetic or philosophical essence in the West—for instance with Spivak lamenting the increasing depoliticization of academic discourse—we come across a tragic irony that characterized much of the thinking in European Romanticism: the Romantic subject had gradually evolved into its very own object of study, and suffered from the fact that its reflective consciousness had reduced its powers of action and capacity for resistance. A more radical impression of this decadence would appear later and quite forcefully in the *fin-de-siècle* and in modernism. However, it was in Romantic thought that the frustrated longing for unity and infinity started to be contrasted with the perception of a disconnected and finite world by means of a proto-theory of modern translation philosophy. The Romantic notion of irony designated its attempt to overcome this critical situation with the techniques of distancing and revaluation that tried to exceed the separation between the self and the world, in order to achieve a 'true' translation between the two. Postmodernity is still struggling with the ethical and aesthetic consequences of this radical individualization of the subject as translator, although the ideal of 'true translation' has been devalued to the status of a utopia.

Another fundamental aspect that might legitimize translation as the major interventional paradigm of modernity is the emergence of a more and more pronounced awareness of the importance of translation to explain the subject's psychology, which Romantic thought started to develop in the 18th and 19th centuries. Johann Gottlieb Fichte had postulated that the self was already the result of a process of translation from itself, realized through reflection and distancing from itself. This idea could nowadays be designated as a self or internal translation of the identity of the subject. This internal translation process was understood within Romanticism as a means of overcoming the psychological limitations of the self and an act of repetition of the origin of life. It also served as a model for the progressive development and continuous growth of the self that had to extend into a space exterior to itself.

It was Novalis who contributed most to this internal translation model with the intention of boosting the development of the self: 'the act of overcoming oneself is, in all circumstances, the most important, the point of origin, the genesis of life'.[14] The German phrase '*sich selbst überspringen*' literally means 'to jump over oneself'. That is to say, to resist assimilation by the norm, exploring the different possibilities of a transformation of the norms and identities pre-established by the system and the discourses of power. In this sense, translation itself would be an act of rewriting as well as an act of resistance.

The Romantic conceptualization of translation as a vital cultural dynamic already resembled a modern model of translation and also of literature—in the sense of both

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14. 'Der Act des sich selbst Überspringens ist überall der höchste—der Urpunct—die Genesis des Lebens.' Novalis, *Werke, Tagebücher und Briefe Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, vol. 2, H.-J. Mähl and R. Samuel (eds.), Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1978, p. 345.

being an endless succession of readings, rewritings, back-translations, etc.—as a replicatory dynamic that inevitably produces translation shifts (mutations, adaptations, neutralizations, etc.). Within this continuum it seems impossible to establish an original, a clear and definable essence, which could serve as an ontological basis for the historical process. We might be tempted to evoke this eternal truth that says that literature is made from literature, but the same applies to any process of creation: there is of course no melody, painting, advertising or political slogan, fashion design, ideological discourse, etc., which has been created *ex nihilo*. The question of when and where the first versions of the *Odyssey* or *Faust* appeared remains inscrutable. Today, the original as a founding idea no longer has a basis and its persuasiveness, as well as its cultural validity, depends on the efficiency of a continuously reaffirmed and institutionalized memory, as the moving force behind the canon and establishment that promotes it. Therefore, any original is justified mainly through its translatability and its ability to be continuously translated (whether in a translingual, transcultural or trans-semiotic sense).

The proto-theory of modern translation, that Romanticism developed from the utopia of a 'progressive universal poetry' and its 'embodied levels of reflection',[15] would be revisited during the early decades of the 20th century by Walter Benjamin, who would conclude that reality consists of 'as many translations as languages'.[16] For Benjamin, the 'language of things' was what we could designate as the real and what represents the 'original' that we aspire to establish: 'It is the translation of the language of things into the language of human beings'.[17]

This idea of language itself being a translation (between things, ideas and words), which had already been present in Aristotle, was reflected by the Renaissance in its doctrine of the world as a readable and decipherable text. Romanticism would subsequently form it into the thesis of philosophy as a translation process: 'The philosopher translates the real world into the world of ideas and vice versa, in order to give them a meaning'.[18] In the 20th century, hermeneutics—a discipline that arose precisely due to this raising of awareness of the difficulties inherent within the processes of translation—would define the understanding of meaning itself as a translation dynamic: 'The translator's task of re-creation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents'.[19]

However, it was Walter Benjamin who established translatability as a condition of communication itself. He saw translatability as a space for intervention, that preceded both individual languages and all translation phenomena in terms of linguistic and semiotic becoming. The desire to approach or return to the 'real' or 'original' is, of course, a utopia, both unreachable and indispensable. This utopia is the subject of

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15. Schlegel, *KFSA*, vol. 1, p. 68.

16. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, 21 vols., R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (eds.), Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 1991, p. 69.

17. Benjamin, GS, vol. 1, p. 69.

18. Novalis, WT, vol. 2, p. 350.

19. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method,* trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, London, Continuum, 2006, p. 389.

Benjamin's famous concept of 'pure language' (*reine Sprache*) established in his essay 'The Translator's Task' (1922).

If resistance stands for progress that 'does not mean to go along with the change, but to look at other alternatives, or what might have happened, what might have been possible',[20] then 'pure language' represents continuous resistance to aesthetics (within the sense of the perception of the real) and to the discourses which are imposed on us. Far from being synonymous with a *mathesis universalis*, Benjamin's 'pure language' is fundamentally a kind of 'strategic essentialism' trying to reduce the abstract or communicative function of language. However, the ideological weight of discourse makes it difficult to approach the real—what Novalis called the 'Urpunkt', the point of origin—but this same ideological weight of discourse can also be understood as a sort of alternative focal point, in search of change. Thus, in 'The Translator's Task', 'pure language' comes to designate the theoretical transversality of language and history, but also refers to the becoming of language as a cultural phenomenon, a becoming, both ethical and aesthetic, which is manifested in the continued practice of translation.

This becoming of language—or area of conflict between poetry and *praxis* as Romanticism considered it—is seen as a reality of its own, intent on illustrating language as less a representation of the real than a production or, better, a translation of the world and of its meanings in constant 'dissemination' (Derrida). Consequently, 'pure language' can be thought of as a guidance system, a strategy to be practiced throughout history without ever being completed:

> While this ultimate being, which is therefore pure speech itself, is in languages bound up only with the linguistic and its transformations, in linguistic constructions it is burdened with heavy and alien meaning. Translation alone possesses the mighty capacity to unbind it from meaning, to turn the symbolising element into the symbolised itself, to recuperate the pure language growing in linguistic development. In this pure language—which no longer signifies or expresses anything but rather, as the expressionless and creative word that is the intended object of every language—all communication, all meaning and all intention arrive at a level where they are destined to be extinguished.[21]

It is above all from the perspective of translation that we can grasp the concepts of temporality and historicity. Herein lies the main thrust of Benjamin's critical theory of translation: to free language from meaning through translation which, in this context, takes on a new hermeneutical and epistemological dimension. Thus, it would be acceptable to read 'The Translator's Task' both as an essay on cultural translation and as a plea for aesthetic resistance:

> And it is in fact on the basis of them that freedom in translation acquires a new and higher justification. Freedom does not gain its standing from communication's meaning, it is precisely truth's task to emancipate freedom from meaning. Rather,

20. Eero Tarasti, 'Semiotics of Resistance: Being, Memory, History—The Counter-Current of Signs', *Semiotica*, no. 173-1/4, 2009, pp. 41-71, p. 51.

21. Walter Benjamin, 'The Translator's Task', trans. Steven Rendall, *TTR*, no. 2, 1997, pp. 151-65, pp. 162-163.

> freedom demonstrates in the translation's own language what it can contribute to
> the service of pure language. To set free in his own language the pure language
> spellbound in the foreign language, to

We may also broaden the understanding of this 'task to emancipate freedom from meaning' in terms of creating a 'counter-current of signs and referencing',[22] so that the task of those who translate becomes a contribution to what Eero Tarasti proposed as a necessary 'semiotics of resistance' (SR 47).

However, we must insist that Benjamin's translation theory is intended neither to define a universally valid method, nor to be a means of determining the supposed truths of linguistic or cultural processes. His conceptualization of translation is that of a movement subject to the contingency of linguistic and cultural evolution, in which we can only try to indicate what, in principle, is representable. A description of the process and the becoming of the translation provides only a vague idea of the 'truth' (read: 'the real'), which, as such, will always remain elusive. This means that the epistemological and systematic strategy of a critical translation consists of a constant migration between languages and cultures, a process implying an immersion (the more complete the better) into the works and minds of others. Thus, the textual form of translation is, by extension, converted into a cultural form.

When Benjamin concludes that the 'interlinear version of the Holy Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation',[23] translation is specified as a space where both the original is verified and freedom exists for shifts and ruptures. This form of reproducing the source text requires us to consider it as in a state of continuous transposition, comparable to the transformations of spaces and modern values that Benjamin identified, for example, in the emergence of the *passages* of 19th-century Paris, the forerunners of today's shopping malls.

An example of this concept of interlinear translation as 'transposition-in-progress' could be the different English versions of 'The Translator's Task'. One of the essay's central tenets[24] is translated in the first English version, performed by Harry Zohn in 1968 (and revised in 1982), in the following way: 'Therefore it is not the highest praise of a translation, […] to say that it reads as if it had originally been written in that language'.[25] Ironically, Zohn's whole translation reads as if it was originally written in English, according to the custom of domestication in AngloSaxon translation. In this specific case, the domestication produces an addition ('to say that', 'had… been written') that has a deforming effect by introducing precisely that personalized anthropocentric perspective which Benjamin sought to avoid.

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22. Tarasti, SR, p. 47.

23. Benjamin, TTT, trans. Steven Rendall, p. 165.

24. 'Es ist daher, vor allem im Zeitalter ihrer Entstehung, das höchste Lob einer Übersetzung nicht, sich wie ein Original ihrer Sprache zu lesen'. Walter Benjamin, 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', in Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux Parisiens. Deutsche Übertragung mit einem Vorwort über die Aufgabe des Übersetzers von Walter Benjamin*, Heidelberg, Richard Weissbach, 1923, pp. VII-XVII, p. XV.

25. Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', trans. Harry Zohn, M. Bullock and M. W. Jennings (eds.), *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, Cambridge/London, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 79.

Zohn's translation has been criticized on many occasions, but it was only in 1997 that Steven Rendall published a more literal version, based on the 'foreignization vs. domestication' dichotomy, already suggested by Goethe (in his *Westöstlicher Diwan*, 1819) and popularized by Lawrence Venuti[26]: 'Hence reading a translation as if it were an original work in the translation's own language is not the highest praise, especially in the age when the translation is produced'.[27] Here we deal with a very obvious aesthetic resistance to the dominant cultural tradition of translation into English, as there is a syntax which hardly conforms to the norm, although it avoids unnecessary intensifications (except for the explicit 'original work in the translation's own language' instead of 'original work in its own language'). A year earlier, though without offering a translation of the complete essay, Douglas Robinson had already been looking for an 'excluded middle between static strangeness and static familiarity […], a dynamic *sliding* between strangeness and familiarity, a becoming-familiar that yet retains an air of alterity'.[28] In his article 'Translation as a Phantom Limb', the American critic carried out a negotiation between *foreignization* and *domestication*, by comparing the practice of translation with the physiological phenomenon of proprioception, and its continued existence in cases of amputation, starting from the same sentence: 'It is therefore, […], the highest praise of a translation—NOT!—that it reads like an original of its language' (TPL). The intensification of the negation takes on a marked political character which specifically allows for the fact that 'established words also have their after-ripening'[29] in discourses, a practice that Benjamin had demanded, but only considered possible from a certain distance in time.

The idea of the interlinear version of the translation proceeds in parallel with the conceptualization of allegory that Benjamin presents as a transmission of images (of things) dependent on a historical context. The 'pure language' that a good translation should make palpable in the target text is itself an allegory, that is, the witness to a past action that was immobilized in a fragmented manner and whose 'mode of intention' can be shown, albeit through the loss of its meaning. However, transmission through an allegory also produces a fragmented result, just as is the case with literal transmission or an interlinear version. In this way, Benjamin foreshadowed the post-structuralist debate, if we think, for instance, of the function that the modern allegory has in postmodernity, which provides continuity to the transitory, to the indeterminate and to the incomplete. In his idea of an interlinear allegorical version, the source and target texts are brought into contact without ever forming a synthesis.

As a paradigmatic example of an interlinear type of allegory, Benjamin mentioned the translations that Hölderlin had carried out from the Greek: "In them the harmony of languages is so deep that meaning is touched by language only in the way an Aeolian harp

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26. See, for example, the introduction to Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, London/New York, Routledge, 2000.

27. Benjamin, TTT, trans. Harry Zohn, p. 79.

28. Douglas Robinson, 'Translation as Phantom Limb', 25 March 2010, http://home.olemiss.edu/~djr/pages/writer/articles/html/phantom.html, [originally published in M. G. Rose (ed.), *Translation Horizons: Beyond the Boundaries of Translation Spectrum*, New York, Center for Research in Translation, 1996, pp. 25-44].

29. Benjamin, TTT, trans. Steven Rendall, p. 155.

is touched by the wind".[30] Here there is no reference to the harmony of meaning, but to a harmony that emerges from the (practically complete) regression of the meaning itself. Derrida was the first to indicate that Benjamin always used the word *flüchtig* ('fleeting', 'volatile') when speaking of the relationship between the source and target texts. The term 'fleeting' highlights the tiny semantic points of contact between languages (*cf.* Derrida, *O monolinguismo do outro*, 1996); but this fleetingness also enables us to see the movement and evolution of the language, thus providing a complementary distribution of the 'modes of intention'. It is with another allegorical example that Benjamin explains what is meant by the idea of the fragmentary freezing of the transition between 'modes of intention':

> Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other, so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the original's mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognisable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language.[31]

The 'modes of intention' of individual languages are represented by pieces of a 'greater language'—that is, in the final instance, 'pure language'. What at first sight appears to be a defence of metonymic techniques is an allegory of the precise moment of transposition that starts from the German verbal form *anbilden* ('conformity', 'forming', 'shape up to', literally: 'co-producing'). The image is meant to indicate that the language is, after all, an ongoing composition of pieces, the edges and interferences of which remain always within sight. This visualization of 'pure language' requires that the 'continuing life' (*Fortleben*) of the original maintain this fragmentary character which is what Benjamin considers to be the 'essence' of any original. Modernising and widening the image, we might say that strategic essentialism consists of preserving works of art, identities, cultures, languages, etc. in their fragmentary character (although as detailed as possible), so that their edges and interferences may resist the mechanising, levelling or categorising habits (of a canon or mainstream, for instance).

In its first English version, Zohn distorted the meaning of this allegory by employing 'to be glued together' for *anbilden* and 'match' for *einander folgen*.[32] This had been criticized by Carol Jacobs who proposed the corresponding versions 'to be articulated together', 'fallow' and '[…] just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel'.[33] Unfortunately, Steven Rendall's full version (*cf. supra*) did not pay heed to the precise work of Jacobs and repeated Zohn's omission.

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30. Benjamin, TTT, trans. Steven Rendall, p. 164.
31. Benjamin, TTT, trans. Steven Rendall, p. 161.
32. Zohn omitted an important element ('*Bruchstücke*') in the final part of the allegory: 'In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel' (*apud)* Carol Jacobs, 'The Monstrosity of Translation', *Modern Language Notes*, no. 6, 1975, pp. 755-66.
33. Jacobs, MT, p. 762.

These and other shifts which occurred in the English translations of 'The Translator's Task' also provide an idea of the complications that arose in the history of its reception in the 20th century. What Benjamin had intended with the translation-as-fragments-of-a-vessel image was a kind of synecdoche, that is, that the pieces remain fragments even when they were considered to form part of a supposed totality, as allegorical parts of a greater language, but excluding the essentialist or foundationalist idea of a whole. Derrida commented on this allegory in a similar manner:

> Comme la cruche qui donne son *topos* poétique à tant de méditations sur la chose et la langue, de Hölderlin à Rilke et à Heidegger, l'amphore est une avec elle-même tout en s'ouvrant au-dehors—et cette ouverture ouvre l'unité, elle la rend possible et lui interdit la totalité.[34]

The synecdoche which avoids the totalitarian construction is also a paradoxical comparison. It seeks a unity that can never exist and that will never be able to join the simply 'shaped' pieces. The metaphor of the vessel becomes an allegory or, as Derrida suggests, a 'metaphor of the metaphor' (TB 223). The recomposed pieces do not represent the meaning of an earlier text and are not signifiers with the function of reproducing a meaning in a symbolic form; however, the allegory or 'metaphor of the metaphor' must uncover the origins and stages that form the process of linguistic meaning. *Metaphorein* designates the transmission of meaning through a signifier or uniform image, which would amount to a metaphysical perspective in the philosophy of language. As such, Benjamin's 'metaphor of the metaphor' seeks to call to mind a very concrete metaphor, representing a fragment within a long succession of meanings and contexts from other times, always in contact with and contaminated by other metaphors. This 'metaphor of the metaphor' documents a history, or rather, a succession of historical presents that lack the basic original value, a point also noted by Paul de Man:

> The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment—so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly—and never reconstitutes itself; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one.[35]

The image of the vessel that Benjamin chose does not allow any symbolization of origin and calls for resistance to its totalitarian connotations. This is the function of 'pure language' which is composed of fragments of the 'modes of intention'. Each translation is a double and paradoxical process: on the one hand, it produces the fragment of a language that has arisen as a fragment from a previous translation; on the other hand, it 'shapes up' to a 'mode of intention' with this fragment, bearing in mind a pure and unreachable language. This 'pure language' does not allow itself to be thought or sketched into reality. It is a utopian construction that appears *en passant* in a translation practice that shapes language after language in a continuous collage of fragments. The defragmentation that never reaches a grain of wholeness or completeness is what might

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34. Jacques Derrida, 'Des tours de Babel', *Psyché. Inventions de l'autre*, Paris, Galilée, 1998, pp. 203-34, p. 223.
35. Paul de Man, 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', in *The Resistance to Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 73-105, p. 91.

be called the *episteme* (Foucault) of postmodernity. However, it is also an ongoing call for aesthetic resistance: shaping 'truths' without ever allowing them to become foundational master narratives. 'Pure language' is intended to remain a master narrative utopia in order to serve as a critical tool. The translation practice which derives from this model is a never-ending process of critical translation and paratranslation. If interpreted in ethical terms, it always requires the reconstruction of as many paratranslational elements hidden in the corresponding 'originals' as possible.

It is already in the title of this defining text on the theory of modern translation ('*Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*'), that Benjamin starts to evoke the idea of aesthetic resistance. The German word *Aufgabe* is a double bind: in addition to the never-ending task, with its function of ensuring the 'continuing life' of the original, *Aufgabe* also means the 'abandonment' or 'resignation' to the claim of faithfulness or complete translation, given the ubiquity of untranslatable elements. A good deal of Derrida's work that calls into question philosophy itself and represents a resistance to its claim to truth,[36] is founded on Benjamin's idea of the *double bind* of the translation task. Indeed, the philosophical search for truth would end up severely limited if thought of in terms of a translational process. In other words: translation subverts truth due to the inevitable transcultural and transcreational 'shaping up' of its sources, because it must not only construct but also deconstruct the 'original'.

Although 'pure language' represents a utopia, it is also a form of resistance against the loss of meaning and truth that is ubiquitous in the ongoing process of cultural globalization, a double bind which, in the end, ensures the continuity of the historical dynamic. Continuing the theory of translation that Benjamin outlined, we might conceive cultural history as a succession of translations along with their conditions and contextualization—that is, their paratranslational context. From a metatranslational perspective, paratranslation also means adopting an epistemological pluralism which combines aesthetic, ethical, political, historical and, last but not least, sociobiological perspectives. Thus, translation can be both a process that enables the 'continuing life' (*Fortleben*) of any cultural phenomenon held to be the original, and an act of resistance to and subversion of totalitarian practice. It is not only in the act of translation that we separate ourselves from our language in order to achieve a position in what Homi K. Bhabha has called the 'third space'. The actual reading of texts, like almost all perception of the phenomena of the real world, occurs in such a transition or translation zone. In this, translation shares with poetry the fact that both are a critique and a resistance to the essentialist conceptualization of language and, ultimately, to the claim to objectivity in traditional philosophy.

I would therefore like to conclude with an example that stems from the translation of poetry, namely that of a quite specific practice, called 'transelation'. Erin Mouré, a Canadian poet of Galician origin, coined the term to signify a hybrid practice, halfway between translation and recreation. Her book *Sheep's Vigil by a Fervent Person* (2001)

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36. See Jacques Derrida, *L'oreille de l'autre: autobiographies, transferts, traductions; textes et debats avec Jacques Derrida*, Montreal, VLB, 1982.

represents a transcreation of the cycle *O Guardador de Rebanhos* by Alberto Caeiro, a heteronym of the Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa, written between 1912-1915. Its subtitle states that it is supposed to be a *Transelation of Alberto Caeiro/Fernando Pessoa's O Guardador de Rebanhos* where the translator, following in the footsteps of the modernist author, has even created a heteronym for herself, altering her name to the Galician Eirin Moure. Even in its paratranslational dimension the book is an intentional rewriting: the cover shows a postcard from the beginning of the 20th century depicting a group of Galician women at a fountain. This paratext evokes, on the one hand, that Alberto Caeiro, following Pessoa, was born in Galicia, but, on the other hand, it conveys a much more concrete dimension to the philosophical bucolism of the source text and draws our attention to personal and gender-specific aspects that the original lacks. The translator's singular strategy, which the prologue describes as 'Trans-*e*-lations. Trans-eirin-lations. Transcreations' (ix), does not seek to be a poetic creation but rather claims for itself the nature of a translation within the interlinguistic sense of the term: 'since it retains the structure of the original text and could not have been created without it. The original text was its driving force and did not impede the work; on the contrary: it intensified it, it strengthened it'.[37]

Within the vast range of heteronyms created by Fernando Pessoa, Alberto Caeiro was supposed to be the master, who argues for an absolute nominalism by which he claims to have eliminated metaphysics and revealed what is false in philosophy and poetry. His writing is an attempt to overcome the self-reflective and iterative *mise-en-abîme*, from which the Anglophone and misunderstood Fernando Pessoa suffered in the narrow-minded Lisbon of the beginning of the 20th century. Until his death, he never ceased to add more and more variations to his verses, a habit which should be seen less as a modernist habit of work-in-progress than as a continuing resistance to the totalitarian status of the original by an ongoing process of (self-)translation and paratranslation. What we are used to reading as variations in a manuscript also represents attempts at different translations of the modernist *horror vacui*, of the generalized fear of loss of master narratives giving meaning and orientation, a problem that the figure and work of Caeiro was supposed to resolve.

Mouré's adaptation of this complex background includes major interventions. As with the Brazilian concrete poets of the sixties and seventies, the translator is elevated to the status of (co-)author, appropriating for herself the original text to bring us closer to its geographical, ideological and subjective reality. She literally cannibalizes the source text (in the sense of Brazilian cultural anthropophagy) by adding to her translation moments of dialogue, ironical, critical-reflexive tones, etc., which represent subjective interventions as well as modernizations which assure a 'continuing life' of the original in a surprising and refreshing manner:

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37. Erin Mouré, '*Hi, Fidelity! or Translating Fernando Pessoa: Felicity Was Ever My Aim*', *Poetics.ca*, no. 4, 2004, 25 March 2010, http://wordsters.net/poetics/poetics04/04moure.htm.

XXXIX

[…]

Porque o único sentido oculto das coisas	For the one hidden meaning of things
É elas não terem sentido oculto nenhum,	is there's no hidden meaning,
É mais estranho do que todas as estranhezas strangeness	And this is more strange than all
E do que os sonhos de todos os poetas	And all the dreams of poets
E os pensamentos de todos os filósofos	And the thoughts of philosophers;
Que as coisas sejam realmente o que parecem ser	Do we need a concept just yet, Mr. Derrida,
E não haja nada que compreender.	Can you wait one minute,
	While things are really what they seem to be
	And understanding is so direct, I can just fake it.

(Sheep's Vigil, pp. 98-99)

Another persistent strategy of interventions is that of autobiographical contextualization:

O luar quando bate na relva	Moonlight's beat in suburb's lawn
Não sei que coisa me lembra…	A heartstring pulls faint memory
	chose or *coisa*
	'take care'
Lembra-me a voz da criada velha	Some times I think of all the babysitters
contando-me contos de fadas.	who told me lies
[…]	as they knew fate.

(*Sheep's Vigil,* pp. 56-57)

Or the way explanations and updates to the work and context of Pessoa/Caeiro are performed, even adding a translinguistic dimension:

XXIV

O que nós vemos das coisas são as coisas.	What we see of things are things.
[…]	[…]
Mas isso (triste de nós que trazemos a alma vestida!)	But this (sad the way we cloak our souls!)

Isso exige um estudo profundo,	This requires relentless study
Uma aprendizagem de desaprender	A learning to unlearn
E uma sequestração na liberdade daquele convento	And finding freedom from that convent, *school*,
De que os poetas dizem que as estrelas são as freiras eternas	In which the poets say that high-lit stars are nuns forever
E as flores as penitentes convictas de um só dia,	And flowers are its penitents, contrite each single day,
Mas onde afinal as estrelas não são senão estrelas	But where in fact, if they'd just look, stars are only stars,
Nem as flores senão flores,	And flowers just flowers,
Sendo por isso que lhes chamamos estrelas e flores.	Hey Virgil, where's your hat in that hot sun,
	Let's call a spade a spade, a star a star, creeks creeks and flowers-
	Well, let's call them *flores*…
	(*Sheep's Vigil*, pp. 66-67)

Thus the 'e', that links the *trans-* and the *latus* in 'translation', highlights the dynamic element, the precise moment of transformation and creation, that is to say, transcreation. It is precisely this freezing of the instants of intervention, of the 'mode of intention' as Benjamin would call it, that allows the categories of time and place, of the translator *qua* subject and of everything which conditions her life and work, to become evident:

> I translated Pessoa by responding to him as a person. […] Besides, I was afraid of responding to the context of what I'd already done, and I wanted to respond only to the Pessoa lines, using the context of my own corporeal position in the world of mid-town Toronto north of Vaughan Road. (Mouré, HF)

Besides being a synonym of aesthetic resistance, this 'using the context of my own […] position in the world' coincides with certain aspects of what I have previously referred to with the concept of 'paratranslation.' In making critical use of the contexts and paratexts in the translation process, we stress the importance of experience in the relationship between languages and cultures by marking, for instance, the deterritorialization of the subject, which is implicit in any translation. It is precisely this immediacy of personal experience that Mouré added to her translation and that can be considered an example of the allostatic dimension of translation processes: that is, the constant frictions that, in a continuous alternation between situations of balance and imbalance, accompany all cultural transformations.

In this paratranslational space, aesthetic resistance is practiced as an attempt to overcome the division between experience and language, between phenomenon and semiotics. Updating, adding, clarification, subjectivization or critical intervention, when applied to an ethical background, are just examples of possible strategic essentialisms that allow the 'shaping up' of 'aesthetics as a tool of knowledge of cultural processes'[38] to a political and cultural means of intervention. Construction in the midst of deconstruction, such is the 'progress' that translation offers as an aesthetics of resistance.

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38. Weiss, N, p. 817.

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