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The Resistance to Theory

Paul de Man

Foreword by Wlad Godzich

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Conclusions:
Walter Benjamin’s
“The Task of the Translator”

I at first thought to leave this last session open for conclusions and discussion; I still hope for the discussion, but I have given up on the conclusions. It seemed to me best, rather than trying to conclude (which is always a terrible anticlimax), just to repeat once more what I have been saying since the beginning, using another text in order to have still another version, another formulation of some of the questions with which we have been concerned throughout this series. It seemed to me that this text by Benjamin on “The Task of the Translator” is a text that is very well known, both in the sense that it is very widely circulated, and in the sense that in the profession you are nobody unless you have said something about this text. Since probably most of us have tried to say something about it, let me see what I can do, and since some of you may be well ahead.

What appears here is an edited transcript of the last of six Messenger Lectures delivered at Cornell University in February and March of 1983. Allusions to the preceding lectures may be clarified by reference to the published essays “Hegel on the Sublime” and “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant,” and to the forthcoming “Kant and Schiller.” This text is based on tape recordings supplemented with eight pages of rough manuscript notes. Solecisms and redundancies have been retained where the possibility of foregrounding a gap between oral performance and printed text seemed to outweigh the likelihood of inconvenience to the reader. In punctuating I have tried to reproduce the pace of oral delivery and to close off as few readings as possible, even when leaving ambiguities open may have been less true to de Man’s intent than to my own reluctance to render a “definitive” text. Except for a few passages in which de Man adopts Harry Zohn’s translation, quotations reproduce de Man’s own impromptu translations. The notes are my own. Thanks to Cornell’s Uris Library and to Christopher Fynsk for tapes, and to Roger Blood for help in transcribing. — William Jewett
of me, I look forward to the questions or suggestions you may have. So, far from concluding or from making very general statements, I want to stay pretty close to this particular text, and see what comes out. If I say stay close to the text, since it is a text on translation, I will need—and that is why I have all these books—translations of this text, because if you have a text which says it is impossible to translate, it is very nice to see what happens when that text gets translated. And the translations confirm, brilliantly, beyond any expectations which I may have had, that it is impossible to translate, as you will see in a moment.

Nevertheless, I have placed this within a kind of framework, a framework which is historical. Since the problems of history have come up frequently, I thought it would be good to situate it within a historical or pseudohistorical framework, and then to move on from there. Therefore I start out with a recurrent problem in history and historiography, which is the problem of modernity. I use as an introduction into this a little essay by the German philosopher Gadamer, who in a collection called Aspekte der Modernität wrote, many years ago, interesting articles called “Die philosophischen Grundlagen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts” (“The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century”).

Gadamer asks the somewhat naive but certainly relevant question, whether what is being done in philosophy in the twentieth century differs essentially from what was being done before, and if it then makes sense to speak of a modernity in philosophical speculation in the twentieth century. He finds as the general theme, the general enterprise of contemporary philosophy, a critical concern with the concept of the subject. Perhaps one wouldn’t say this now, which perhaps dates this piece a little bit, but it is still relevant. His question then is whether the way in which the critique of the concept of the subject is being addressed by present-day philosophy differs essentially from the way it had been addressed by the predecessors of contemporary philosophy, in German Idealist philosophy—in some of the authors with whom we have been concerned, such as Kant, Hegel, and others. He writes the following sentence, which is our starting point:

Is the critique of the concept of the subject which is being attempted in our century something else, something different from a mere repetition of what had been accomplished by German Idealist philosophy—and, must we not admit, with, in our case, incomparably less power of abstraction, and without the conceptual strength that characterized the earlier movement?!

Is what we are doing just a repetition? And he answers, surprise: “This is not the case.” What we are doing really is something new, something different, and we can lay claim to being modern philosophers. He finds three rubrics in which we—contemporary philosophers—he, Gadamer—is ahead of his predecessors, and he characterizes these three progressions in terms of a decreased naïveté. To us now it seems, if we look back on Hegel or Kant, that there is a certain
questions you may have. So, far statements, I want to stay pretty out. If I say stay close to the bed—and that is why I have all if you have a text which says it
what happens when that text gets antly, beyond any expectations late, as you will see in a moment.
end of framework, a framework story have come up frequently, I a historical or pseudohistorical before I start out with a recurrent the problem of modernity. I use German philosopher Gadamer, Grundlagen des zwanzigsten (Twentieth Century)".
re relevant question, whether what any differences essentially from what sense to speak of a modernity in these issues. He finds as the general theme, why, a critical concern with the this now, which perhaps dates question then is whether the way is being addressed by present-day been addressed by the predecessonealism philosophy — in some of, such as Kant, Hegel, and is our starting point:
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answers, surprise: “This is not new, something different, and He finds three rubrics in which — is ahead of his predecessors, terms of a decreased naiveté. For Kant, that there is a certain

naiveté there which we have now grown beyond. He distinguishes between three types of naiveté, which he calls Naivität des Setzens (naiveté of positing), Naivität der Reflexion (naiveté of reflection), and Naivität des Begriffs (naiveté of the concept).

Very briefly, what is meant by the first, by a certain “naiveté of position,” is a critique which we have been able to develop of pure perception and of pure declarative discourse, in relation to the problem of the subject. We are now ahead of Hegel in that we know better that the subject does not dominate its own utterances; we are more aware that it is naïve to assume that the subject really controls its own discourse; we know this is not the case. Yet he qualifies this one bit: nevertheless, understanding is available to us to some extent, by a hemeneutic process in which understanding, by a historical process, can catch up with the presuppositions it had made about itself. We get a development of Gadamer, disciple of Heidegger, of the notion of a hemeneutic circle, where the subject is blind to its own utterance, but where nevertheless the reader who is aware of the historicity of that blindness can recover the meaning, can recover a certain amount of control over the text by means of this particular hermeneutic pattern. This model of understanding is ahead of the Hegelian model exactly to the same extent that one could say that the hermeneutics of Heidegger are ahead of the hermeneutics of Hegel, in Gadamer’s sense.

He then speaks of the “naiveté of reflection,” and develops further what is already posited in the first; namely, he asserts the possibility now of a historicity of understanding, in a way that is not accessible to individual self-reflection. It is said that Hegel, in a sense, was not historical enough, that in Hegel it is still too much the subject itself which originates its own understanding, whereas now one is more aware of the difficulty of the relationship between the self and its discourse. Where in the first progression he refers to Heidegger’s contribution, here he refers very much to his own contribution — historicizing the notion of understanding, by seeing understanding (as the later Rezeptionsästhetik, which comes from Gadamer to a large extent, will develop it) as a process between author and reader in which the reader acquires an understanding of the text by becoming aware of the historicity of the movement that occurs between the text and himself. Here Gadamer also makes a claim that something new is going on nowadays, and indeed, the stress on reception, the stress on reading, are characteristic of contemporary theory, and can be claimed to be new.

Finally, he speaks of the “naiveté of the concept,” in which the problem of the relationship between philosophical discourse and rhetorical and other devices which pertain more to the realm of ordinary discourse or common language was not, with Kant and Hegel, being examined critically. We alluded to an example of that yesterday when Kant raises the problem of hypotyposis and invites us to become aware of the use of metaphors in our own philosophical discourse. That type of question, which at least was mentioned by Kant, and was mentioned
much less by Hegel, is now much more developed. Gadamer’s allusion is to Wittgenstein, and also indirectly to Nietzsche. We no longer think, says Gadamer, that conceptual and ordinary language are separable; we now have a concept of the problematics of language which is less naive in that it sees to what extent philosophical language is still dependent on ordinary language, and how close it is to it. This is the modernity which he suggests, and which he details by these three indications.

Now although this is Kantian to some extent in its critical outlook, it is still very much a Hegelian model. The scheme or concept of modernity as the overcoming of a certain non-awareness or naivety by means of a critical negation — by means of a critical examination which implies the negation of certain positive relationships and the achieving of a new consciousness — allows for the establishment of a new discourse which claims to overcome or to renew a certain problematic. This pattern is very traditionally Hegelian, in the sense that the development of consciousness is always shown as a kind of overcoming of a certain naivety and a rise of consciousness to another level. It is traditionally Hegelian, which does not mean that it is in Hegel, but it is in Hegel the way Hegel is being taught in the schools. Indeed, Gadamer ends his piece with a reference to Hegel:

The concept of spirit, which Hegel borrowed from the Christian spiritual tradition, is still the ground of the critique of the subject and of the subjective spirit that appears as the main task of the post-Hegelian, that is to say modern, period. This concept of spirit (Geist), which transcends the subjectivity of the ego, finds its true abode in the phenomenon of language, which stands more and more as the center of contemporary philosophy. 2

Contemporary philosophy is a matter of getting beyond Hegel in Hegelian terms, by focusing the Hegelian démarche, the Hegelian dialectic, more specifically on the question of language. That is how modernity is here defined, as a Hegelianism which has concentrated more on linguistic dimensions.

If we compare the critical, dialectical, non-essentialist (because pragmatic to some extent, since an allowance is made for common language) concept of modernity which Gadamer here advances, with Benjamin’s text on language in “The Task of the Translator,” then at first sight, Benjamin would appear as highly regressive. He would appear as messianic, prophetic, religiously messianic, in a way that may well appear to be a relapse into the naivety denounced by Gadamer. Indeed, he has been criticized for this. Such a relapse would actually return to a much earlier stage even than that of Kant, Hegel, and idealist philosophy. The first impression you receive of Benjamin’s text is that of a messianic, prophetic pronouncement, which would be very remote from the cold critical spirit which, from Hegel to Gadamer, is held up as the spirit of modernity. Indeed, as you read this text, you will have been struck by the messianic tone, by a figure of the poet as an almost sacred language. All references to poetry, a sacerdotal, an almost priestlike, Hölderlin, of George, and of Mallarmé in the essay.

(Since I mention George, one is which has now lost much of its sign that was still considered the most important when this was written this was an idea. Benjamin quotes Pannwitz, a disciple refers to George in a relevant way: a poet, again, as some kind of prophet doesn’t kid around with that, he sees into one, with still quite a bit added an exalted notion of the role of poetry benefits that go with it. But this tone and over a certain concept of poetry echoes of it in the way Benjamin appears. The same is true of references to George and of his group, where you of Hölderlin. Many echoes of this all dedicated his commentaries on was a disciple of George and a messiah you know, the first editor of Hölderlin it may be familiar to you, it may be the atmosphere in which this essay the poetic as the sacred, as the language somehow a sacred figure, is commited.

It is not just in the form of echo seems to have been part of the spiritual sacred, ineffable language finds pertaining, in the categorical way in which as being oriented, in any sense, has provoked the ire of the defense problem of poetic interpretation fish or Riffaterre in this country course Jauss and his disciples who the one which begins this essay is essay by saying:

In the appreciation of a work of receiver never proves fruitful. No
by a figure of the poet as an almost sacred figure, as a figure which echoes sacred language. All references to particular poets within the text put this much in evidence. The poets who are being mentioned are poets one associates with a sacerdotal, an almost priestlike, spiritual function of poetry: this is true of Hölderlin, of George, and of Mallarmé, all of whom are very much present in the essay.

(Since I mention George, one is aware of the presence of George—a name which has now lost much of its significance, but which at that time in Germany was still considered the most important, central poet, although in 1923 or 1924 when this was written this was already getting toward its end. For example, Benjamin quotes Pannwitz, a disciple of George, at the end of the text. And he refers to George in a relevant way: in George there was a claim made for the poet, again, as some kind of prophet, as a kind of messianic figure—George doesn’t kid around with that, he sees himself at least as Virgil and Dante combined into one, with still quite a bit added to it if necessary—therefore he has a highly exalted notion of the role of the poet, and incidentally of himself, and of the benefits that go with it. But this tone hangs over the German academic discourse and over a certain concept of poetry which were then current. There are many echoes of it in the way Benjamin approaches the problem, at least superficially seen. The same is true of references to Holderlin, who at that time was a discovery of George and of his group, where you find a certain messianic, spiritual concept of Holderlin. Many echoes of this are still to be found in Heidegger, who after all dedicated his commentaries on Hölderlin to Norbert von Hellingrath, who was a disciple of George and a member of the George circle, and who was, as you know, the first editor of Hölderlin. I sketch in this little piece of background—it may be familiar to you, it may be entirely redundant—to show that the mood, the atmosphere in which this essay, was written is one in which the notion of the poetic as the sacred, as the language of the sacred, the figure of the poet as somehow a sacred figure, is common, and is frequent.)

It is not just in the form of echoes that this is present in Benjamin, it almost seems to have been part of the statement itself. This notion of poetry as the sacred, ineffable language finds perhaps its extreme form already from the beginning, in the categorical way in which Benjamin dismisses any notion of poetry as being oriented, in any sense, toward an audience or a reader. This passage has provoked the ire of the defenders of Rezeptionsästhetik, who analyze the problem of poetic interpretation from the perspective of the reader—Stanley Fish or Riffaterre in this country follow that line to some extent, but it is of course Jauss and his disciples who do this the most. For them, a sentence like the one which begins this essay is absolutely scandalous. Benjamin begins the essay by saying:

In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public
or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an "ideal" receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man's physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.³

He couldn't be more categorical than in this assertion at the beginning of the essay. You can see how this would have thrown them into a slight panic in Konstanz, a panic with which they deal by saying that this is an essentialist theory of art, that this stress on the author at the expense of the reader is pre-Kantian, since already Kant had given the reader (the receptor, the beholder) an important role, more important than the author's. This is then held up as an example of the regression to a messianic conception of poetry which would be religious in the wrong sense, and it is very much attacked for that reason.

But, on the other hand, Benjamin is also frequently praised as the one who has returned the dimension of the sacred to literary language, and who has thus overcome, or at least considerably refined, the secular historicity of literature on which the notion of modernity depends. If one can think of modernity as it is described by Gadamer, as a loss of the sacred, as a loss of a certain type of poetic experience, as its replacement by a secular historicism which loses contact with what was originally essential, then one can praise Benjamin for having re-established the contact with what had there been forgotten. Even in Habermas there are statements in that direction. But closer to home, an example of somebody who reads Benjamin with a great deal of subtlety, who is aware of the complications, and who praises him precisely for the way in which he combines a complex historical pattern with a sense of the sacred, is Geoffrey Hartman, who writes in one of his latest books as follows:

This chiasmus of hope and catastrophe is what saves hope from being unmasked as only catastrophe: as an illusion or unsatisfied movement of desire that wrecks everything. The foundation of hope becomes remembrance; which confirms the function, even the duty of historian and critic. To recall the past is a political act: a "recherche" that involves us with images of peculiar power, images that may constrain us to identify with them, that claim the "weak Messianic power" in us (Thesis 2). These images, split off from their fixed location in history, undo concepts of homogeneous time, flash up into or reconstitute the present. "To Robespierre," Benjamin writes, continuing Marx's reflections in The Eighteenth Brumaire, "ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of now (Jetztzeit) which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate" (Thesis 14).⁴

The reference here is to historical remembrance, to a historical concept which then dovetails, which injects itself into an apocalyptic, religious, spiritual concept, thus marrying history with the sacred attractive. It is certainly highly attractive, if it gives us both the law with the particular rigor that goes with it. But you can still talk in terms of how this combination of nihilistic rigor, religious, balanced perspective on the quote and to admire this possibility of Benjamins center on this problem this text on "The Task of the Translators" characteristic indicators in that direc

We now then ask the simplest, questions in relation to Benjamin's does Benjamin say? What does he say? It seems absurd to ask a question that because we can certainly admit that we have some minimal agreement about the text. The French revolution viewed itself as Rome incarnate" (Thesis 14).⁴

But it seems that, in the case of Benjamin, the translators, who certainly do not go to the same extent, don't seem to be talking. So much so much that when Benjamin says that some things have been left in, or there is no quote and to admire this possibility of Benjamin's said. This is what Harry Zohn, who translated the text in French — very well. Harry Zohn, you may not see this as a difficult task, but somehow it became easier.

An example which has become near the end of Benjamin's essay, Text unmittelbar, ohne Vermittlung Lehre angehört, ist er übersetzbar directly, without mediation, to the further ado, translatable" — the text...
The concept of an "ideal" consideration of art, since all it much. Art, in the same way, but in none of its works is intended for the economy for the listener. 3

Assertion at the beginning of the within them into a slight panic in saying that this is an essentialist at the expense of the reader is reader (the receptor, the beholder) or his. This is then held up as an example of poetry which would be attacked for that reason.

Frequently praised as the one who early language, and who has thus secular historicity of literature one can think of modernity as it 4

as a loss of a certain type of historicism which loses contact can praise Benjamin for having been forgotten. Even in Habermas home, an example of somebody who is aware of the complicacy way in which he combines a

red, is Geoffrey Hartman, who thus marrying history with the sacred in a way which is highly seductive, highly attractive. It is certainly highly attractive to Hartman, and one can understand why, since it gives one both the language of despair, the language of nihilism, with the particular rigor that goes with that; but, at the same time, hope! So you have it all: you have the critical perception, you have the possibility of carrying on in apocalyptic tones, you have the particular eloquence that comes with that (because one can only really get excited if one writes in an apocalyptic mode); but you can still talk in terms of hope, and Benjamin would be an example of this combination of nihilistic rigor with sacred revelation. A man who likes a judicious, balanced perspective on those things, like Hartman, has reason to quote and to admire this possibility in Benjamin. The problem of the reception of Benjamin centers on this problem of the messianic, and very frequently it is this text on "The Task of the Translator" that is quoted as one of the most characteristic indicators in that direction.

We now then ask the simplest, the most naive, the most literal of possible questions in relation to Benjamin's text, and we will not get beyond that: what does Benjamin say? What does he say, in the most immediate sense possible? It seems absurd to ask a question that is so simple, that seems to be so unnecessary, because we can certainly admit that among literate people we would at least have some minimal agreement about what is being said here, allowing us then to embroider upon this statement, to take positions, discuss, interpret, and so on. But it seems that, in the case of this text, this is very difficult to establish.

Even the translators, who certainly are close to the text, who had to read it closely to some extent, don't seem to have the slightest idea of what Benjamin is saying; so much so that when Benjamin says certain things rather simply in one way—for example he says that something is not—the translators, who at least know German well enough to know the difference between something is and something is not, don't see it! and put absolutely and literally the opposite of what Benjamin has said. This is remarkable, because the two translators I have—one, Harry Zohn, who translated the text in English, and Maurice de Gandillac, who translated the text in French—are very good translators, and know German very well. Harry Zohn, you may know; Maurice de Gandillac is an eminent professor of philosophy at the University of Paris, a very learned man who knows German very well, and who should be able to tell the difference between, for example, "Ich gehe nach Paris" and "Ich gehe nicht nach Paris." It is not more difficult than that, but somehow he doesn't get it.

An example which has become famous and has an anecdote is the passage near the end of Benjamin's essay, where Benjamin says the following: "Wo der Text unmittelbar, ohne vermittelnden Sinn," and so on. "der Wahheit oder der Lehre angehört, ist er übersetzbar schlechthin" (p. 62). "Where the text pertains directly, without mediation, to the realm of the truth and of dogma, it is, without further ado, translatable"—the text can be translated, schlechthin, so there is
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no problem about translating it. Gandillac—I won’t comment on this—translates this relatively simple, enunciatory sentence: ‘‘Là où le texte, immédiatement, sans l’entremise d’un sens . . . relève de la vérité ou de la doctrine, il est purement et simplement intraduisible’’ (p. 275) — untranslatable. What adds some comedy to this particular instance is that Jacques Derrida was doing a seminar with this particular text in Paris, using the French—Derrida’s German is pretty good, but he prefers to use the French, and when you are a philosopher in France you take Gandillac more or less seriously. So Derrida was basing part of his reading on the ‘‘intraduisible,’’ on the untranslatability, until somebody in his seminar (so I’m told) pointed out to him that the correct word was ‘‘translatable.’’ I’m sure Derrida could explain that it was the same . . . and I mean that in a positive sense, it is the same, but still, it is not the same without some additional explanation. This is an example, and we will soon see some other examples which are more germane to the questions which we will bring up about this text.

Why, in this text, to begin with, is the translator the exemplary figure? Why is the translator held up in relation to the very general questions about the nature of poetic language which the text asks? The text is a poetics, a theory of poetic language, so why does Benjamin not go to the poets or the reader, possibly; or the pair poet-reader, as in the model of reception? And since he is so negative about the notion of reception anyway, what makes the essential difference between the pair author-reader and the pair author-translator? There are, to some extent, obvious empirical answers one can give. The essay was written, as you know, as an introduction to Benjamin’s own translation of the Tableaux parisiens of Baudelaire; it might just be out of megalomania that he selects the figure of the —. One of the reasons why he takes the translator rather than the poet is that the translator, per definition, fails. The translator can never do what the original text did. Any translation is always second in relation to the original, and the translator as such is lost from the very beginning. He is, per definition underpaid, he is per definition overworked, he is per definition ‘‘the one history will not really retain as an equal, unless he also happens to be a poet, but that is not always the case. If the text is called ‘‘Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,’’ we have to read this title more or less as a tautology: Aufgabe, task, can also mean the one who has to give up. If you enter the Tour de France and you give up, that is the Aufgabe — ‘‘er hat aufgegeben,’’ he doesn’t continue in the race anymore. It is in that sense also the defeat, the giving up, of the translator. The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refining what was there in the original.

The question then becomes why this failure with regard to an original text, to an original poet, is for Benjamin exemplary. The question also becomes how the translator differs from the poet, and here Benjamin is categorical in asserting that the translator is unlike, differs essentially from, the poet and the artist. This is a curious thing to say, a thing that assumes (and obviously it is the case) that good translator are similar to the great poet. This does not mean therefore that they are doing so shocking in a way, that here again they do not see it. Benjamin says (in Zohn) that a poet, cannot claim permanence for his work; ‘‘Ainsi la traduction, à la durée de ses ouvrages, et en l’art . . .’’ (p. 267). The original is unähnlich der Kunst . . .’’ (p. 55) is so surprising, goes so much again and again, that the translator cannot see it, that the careful translator cannot see it. Zohn saw it — don’t get the Gandillac gets it all wrong—basic. But the question is why. And the translator, as he is so close to the poet, the Dichter, but they are Übersetzer also. In that sense, A number of the most eminent or are incomparably more important some of the great among them, cannot be simply subsumed as consider them as translators. As of the translator, too, may be regressed from the task of the poet. (p. 7)

Of the differences between the first that comes to mind is that to a statement that is not purely with the poet, that he has to say some does not necessarily relate to language original is the relationship between of meaning or the desire to say
is a curious thing to say, a thing that goes against common sense, because one assumes (and obviously it is the case) that some of the qualities necessary for a good translator are similar to the qualities necessary for a good poet. This does not mean therefore that they are doing the same thing. The assertion is so striking, so shocking in a way, that here again the translator (Maurice de Gandillac) does not see it. Benjamin says (in Zohn’s translation): “Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products . . .” (p. 75); Gandillac, the same passage: “Ainsi la traduction, encore qu’elle ne puisse élever une prétention à la durée de ses ouvrages, et en cela elle n’est pas sans ressemblance avec l’art . . .” (p. 267). The original is absolutely unambiguous: “Übersetzung also, wiewohl sie auf Dauer ihrer Gebilde nicht Anspruch erheben kann und hierin unähnlich der Kunst . . .” (p. 55). As you come upon it in a text, the statement is so surprising, goes so much against common sense, that an intelligent, learned, and careful translator cannot see it, cannot see what Benjamin says. It is remarkable. Zohn saw it—don’t get the impression that Zohn gets it all right and Gandillac gets it all wrong—basically Gandillac is a little ahead of Zohn, I think, in the final analysis.

At any rate, for Benjamin there is a sharp distinction between them. It is not necessary for good translators to be good poets. Some of the best translators—he mentions Voss (translator of Homer), Luther, and Schlegel—are very poor poets. There are some poets who are also translators: he mentions Hölderlin, and George, who translated Baudelaire—Dante also, but primarily Baudelaire, so Benjamin is close to George. But then, he says, it is not because they are great poets that they are great translators, they are great poets and they are great translators. They are not purely, as Heidegger will say of Hölderlin, Dichter der Dichter, but they are Übersetzer der Dichter, they are beyond the poets because they are also translators.

A number of the most eminent ones, such as Luther, Voss, and Schlegel, are incomparably more important as translators than as creative writers; some of the great among them, such as Hölderlin and Stefan George, cannot be simply subsumed as poets, and quite particularly not if we consider them as translators. As translation is a mode of its own, the task of the translator, too, may be regarded as distinct and clearly differentiated from the task of the poet. (p. 76)

Of the differences between the situation of the translator and that of the poet, the first that comes to mind is that the poet has some relationship to meaning, to a statement that is not purely within the realm of language. That is the naïveté of the poet, that he has to say something, that he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language. The relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language, wherein the problem of meaning or the desire to say something, the need to make a statement, is
entirely absent. Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning that could be copied, paraphrased, or imitated. That is not the case for the poet; poetry is certainly not paraphrase, clarification, or interpretation, a copy in that sense; and that is already the first difference.

If it is in some fundamental way unlike poetry, what, in Benjamin’s text, does translation resemble? One of the things it resembles would be philosophy, in that it is critical, in the same way that philosophy is critical, of a simple notion of imitation, of philosophical discourse as an Abbild (imitation, paraphrase, reproduction) of the real situation. Philosophy is not an imitation of the world as we know it, but it has another relationship to that world. Critical philosophy, and the reference would be specifically to Kant again, will be critical in the same way of the notion of the imitative concept of the world.

Kant would indeed be critical of a notion of art as imitation; this would be true of Hegel to some extent too, because there is, precisely, a critical element that intervenes here and which takes this image, this model, away, which destroys,undo this concept of imitation.

Translation is also, says Benjamin, more like criticism or like the theory of literature than like poetry itself. It is by defining himself in relation to Friedrich Schlegel and to German Romanticism in general that Benjamin establishes this similarity between literary criticism (in the sense of literary theory) and translation; and this historical reference to the Jena Romanticism here gives to the notion of criticism and literary theory a dignity which it does not necessarily normally have. Both criticism and translation are caught in the gesture which Benjamin calls ironic, a gesture which undoes the stability of the original by giving it a definitive, canonical form in the translation or in the theorization. In a curious way, translation canonizes its own version more than the original was canonical. That the original was not purely canonical is clear from the fact that it demands translation; it cannot be definitive since it can be translated. But you cannot, says Benjamin, translate the translation; once you have a translation you cannot translate it any more. You can translate only an original. The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice. The act of critical, theoretical reading performed by a critic like Friedrich Schlegel and means of which the original work is extent put in motion, de-canonized, to canonical authority — is similar

Finally, translation is like history understand. In what is the most diff it is like history to the extent that with any kind of natural process, ripening, as organic growth, or even a natural process of growth and of in the reverse way: we are to undo of history, rather than understand hi If we want to understand what r perspective of historical change. In translation and the original is not processes such as resemblance or to understand the original from the this historical pattern would be the b

All these activities that have b temology, criticism and literary th history understood as a nonorgan inal activities. Philosophy derives because it is the critical examinatio derives from poetry because it is in it. History derives from pure action have already taken place. Because activities, they are therefore sing a sense from the start because the insists that the model of their d It is not a natural process: the tran the child resembles the parent, not the original. In that sense, since t imitations, one would be tempted is not the metaphor of the original; übersetzen, means metaphor. Überpherein, to move over, übersetzen, lates metaphor—which, asserts B metaphors, yet the word means Benjamin is saying. No wonder th assumption to say übersetzen is a resemblance, there is no resembl Amazingly paradoxical statement,
language to language, not a relation tied, paraphrased, or imitated. Not paraphrase, clarification, is already the first difference.

Try, what, in Benjamin's text, resembles would be philosophy, not an imitation of the world that world. Critical philosophy, again, will be critical in the perspective of the world.

Between the original and its translation is similar to what a translator performs. Finally, translation is like history, and that will be the most difficult thing to understand. In what is the most difficult passage in this text, Benjamin says that it is like history to the extent that history is not to be understood by analogy with any kind of natural process. We are not supposed to think of history as ripening, as organic growth, or even as a dialectic, as anything that resembles a natural process of growth and of movement. We are to think of history rather in the reverse way: we are to understand natural changes from the perspective of history, rather than understand history from the perspective of natural changes. If we want to understand what ripening is, we should understand it from the perspective of historical change. In the same way, the relationship between the translation and the original is not to be understood by analogy with natural processes such as resemblance or derivation by formal analogy; rather we are to understand the original from the perspective of the translation. To understand this historical pattern would be the burden of any reading of this particular text.

All these activities that have been mentioned—philosophy as critical epistemology, criticism and literary theory (the way Friedrich Schlegel does it), or history understood as a nonorganic process—are themselves derived from original activities. Philosophy derives from perception, but it is unlike perception because it is the critical examination of the truth-claims of perception. Criticism derives from poetry because it is inconceivable without the poetry that precedes it. History derives from pure action, since it follows necessarily upon acts which have already taken place. Because all these activities are derived from original activities, they are therefore singularly inconclusive, are failed, are aborted in a sense from the start because they are derived and secondary. Yet Benjamin insists that the model of their derivation is not that of resemblance or of imitation. It is not a natural process: the translation does not resemble the original the way the child resembles the parent, nor is it an imitation, a copy, or a paraphrase of the original. In that sense, since they are not resemblances, since they are not imitations, one would be tempted to say they are not metaphors. The translation is not the metaphor of the original; nevertheless, the German word for translation, übersetzen, means metaphor. Übersetzen translates exactly the Greek metaphorein, to move over, to pass across. Übersetzen, I should say, translates metaphor—which, asserts Benjamin, is not at all the same. They are not metaphors, yet the word means metaphor. The metaphor is not a metaphor, Benjamin is saying. No wonder that translators have difficulty. It is a curious assumption to say übersetzen is not metaphorical, übersetzen is not based on resemblance, there is no resemblance between the translation and the original. Amazingly paradoxical statement, metaphor is not metaphor.
All these activities — critical philosophy, literary theory, history — resemble each other in the fact that they do not resemble that from which they derive. But they are all intralinguistic: they relate to what in the original belongs to language, and not to meaning as an extralinguistic correlate susceptible of paraphrase and imitation. They disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated. They reveal that their failure, which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an essential failure, an essential disarticulation which was already there in the original. They kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead. They read the original from the perspective of a pure language (reine Sprache), a language that would be entirely freed of the illusion of meaning — pure form if you want; and in doing so they bring to light a dismemberment, a de-canonization which was already there in the original from the beginning.

In the process of translation, as Benjamin understands it—which has little to do with the empirical act of translating, as all of us practice it on a daily basis — there is an inherent and particularly threatening danger. The emblem of that danger is Hölderlin’s translations of Sophocles:

Confirmation of this as well as of every other important aspect is supplied by Hölderlin’s translations, particularly those of the two tragedies by Sophocles. In them the harmony of the languages is so profound that sense is touched by language only the way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind. ... Hölderlin’s translations in particular are subject to the enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator with silence. Hölderlin’s translations from Sophocles were his last work, in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language. (pp. 81-82)

Translation, to the extent that it disarticulates the original, to the extent that it is pure language and is only concerned with language, gets drawn into what he calls the bottomless depth, something essentially destructive, which is in language itself.

What translation does, by reference to the fiction or hypothesis of a pure language devoid of the burden of meaning, is that it implies — in bringing to light what Benjamin calls “die Wehen des eignen” — the suffering of what one thinks of as one’s own — the suffering of the original language. We think we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think that we are not alienated. What the translation reveals is that this alienation is at its strongest in our relation to our own original language, that the original language within which we are engaged is disarticulated in a way which imposes upon us a particular alienation, a particular suffering. Here too the translators, with considerable unanimity, cannot see this statement. Benjamin also Eigenstes es zufällt, auf Wehen des eigenen zu merken’” didn’t correspond with each other, “Wehen, pains, as “birth pangs,”” Gandillac is very explicit about it (p. 266) in the most literal, clinical way they do this is a mystery. Wehen is kind of suffering, without necessity, resurrection, which would be associated with suffering in producing something that is willing to suffer (especially speaking of the ‘Nachreife des fernen Prozesses,’ which again is wrong (a particularly good wine made from novel Nachsommer (“Indian Summer”) slight exhaustion, of life to which are not entitled, time has passed, that Benjamin constantly uses, death in a sense. The translation original is already dead, but the translator thus assuming and confirming the order, or has to do with the same looking back on a process of death taking place. So if you translate it by “death pangs” as perhaps more on death than on life.

The process of translation, if you look at it as a process of motion that has the appearance of pathos of a self, a kind of mani...
cannot see this statement. Benjamin’s text is: “dass gerade unter allen Formen ihr also Eigenstes es zufällt, auf jene Nachreife des fremden Wortes, auf die Wehen des eigenen zu merken” (p. 54). The two translators—I guess they didn’t correspond with each other, they did this d’un commun accord—translate Wehen, pains, as “birth pangs,” as being particularly the pains of childbirth. Gandillac is very explicit about it, he calls it “les douleurs obstétricales” (p. 266) in the most literal, clinical way; Zohn says “birth pangs” (p. 73). Why they do this is a mystery. Wehen can mean birth pangs, but it does mean any kind of suffering, without necessarily the connotation of birth and rebirth, of resurrection, which would be associated with the notion of birth pangs because you suffer in producing something—and this is a magnificent moment, you’d be willing to suffer (especially easy for us to say). Benjamin has just been speaking of the “Nachreife des fremden Wortes,” translated by Zohn as “maturing process,” which again is wrong. Nachreife is like the German word Spiölese (a particularly good wine made from the late, rotten grape), it is like Stifter’s novel Nachsommer (“Indian Summer”)—it has the melancholy, the feeling of slight exhaustion, of life to which you are not entitled, happiness to which you are not entitled, time has passed, and so on. It is associated with another word that Benjamin constantly uses, the word überleben, to live beyond your own death in a sense. The translation belongs not to the life of the original, the original is already dead, but the translation belongs to the afterlife of the original, thus assuming and confirming the death of the original. Nachreife is of the same order, or has to do with the same; it is by no means a maturing process, it is a looking back on a process of maturity that is finished, and that is no longer taking place. So if you translate Wehen by “birth pangs,” you would have to translate it by “death pangs” as much as by “birth pangs,” and the stress is perhaps more on death than on life.

The process of translation, if we can call it a process, is one of change and of motion that has the appearance of life, but of life as an afterlife, because translation also reveals the death of the original. Why is this? What are those death pangs, possibly birth pangs, of the original? It is easy to say to some extent what this suffering is not. It is certainly not subjective pains, some kind of pathos of a self, a kind of manifestation of a self-pathos which the poet would have expressed as his sufferings. This is certainly not the case, because, says Benjamin, the sufferings that are here, being mentioned are not in any sense human. They would certainly not be the sufferings of an individual, or of a subject. That also is very hard to see, for the translators. Zohn, confronted with that passage (I will stop this game of showing up the translators, but it is always of some interest), translates: “If they are referred exclusively to man” (p. 70). Benjamin very clearly says: “Wenn sie nicht . . . auf den Menschen bezogen werden” (p. 51), if you do not relate them to man. The stress is precisely that the suffering that is mentioned, the failure, is not a human failure; it does not
refer therefore to any subjective experience. The original is unambiguous in that respect. This suffering is also not a kind of historical pathos, the pathos you heard in Hartman’s reference to Benjamin as the one who had discovered the pathos of history; it is not this pathos of remembrance, or this pathetic mixture of hope and catastrophe and apocalypse which Hartman captures, which is present certainly in Benjamin’s tone, but not so much in what he says. It is not the pathos of a history, it is not the pathos of what in Hölderlin is called the “dürftiger Zeit” between the disappearance of the gods and the possible return of the gods. It is not this kind of sacrificial, dialectical, and elegiac gesture, by means of which one looks back on the past as a period that is lost, which then gives you the hope of another future that may occur.

The reasons for this pathos, for this Wehen, for this suffering, are specifically linguistic. They are stated by Benjamin with considerable linguistic structural precision; so much so that if you come to a word like “abyss” in the passage about Hölderlin, where it is said that Hölderlin tumbles in the abyss of language, you should understand the word “abyss” in the non-pathetic, technical sense in which we speak of a mise en abyme structure, the kind of structure by means of which it is clear that the text becomes itself an example of what it exemplifies. The text about translation is itself a translation, and the untranslatability which it mentions about itself inhabits its own texture and will inhabit anybody who in his turn will try to translate it, as I am now trying, and failing, to do. The text is untranslatable: it was untranslatable for the translators who tried to do it, it is untranslatable for the commentators who talk about it, it is an example of what it states, it is a mise en abyme in the technical sense, a story within the story of what is its own statement.

What are the linguistic reasons which allow Benjamin to speak of a suffering, of a disarticulation, of a falling apart of any original work, or of any work to the extent that that work is a work of language? On this Benjamin is very precise, and offers us what amounts in very few lines to an inclusive theory of language. The disjunction is first of all between what he calls “das Gemeinte,” what is meant, and the “Art des Meinens,” the way in which language means; between logos and lexis, if you want — what a certain statement means, and the way in which the statement is meant to mean. Here the difficulties of the translators are a little more interesting, because they involve philosophical concepts that are of some importance. Gandillac, a philosopher who knows phenomenology and who writes in a period when phenomenology is the overriding philosophical pressure in France, translates by “visee intentionnelle” (p. 272). The way we would now translate in French “das Gemeinte” and “Art des Meinens” would be by the distinction between vouloir dire and dire: “‘to mean,’” “‘to say,’” Zohn translates by “the intended object” and the “mode of intention” (p. 74). There is a phenomenological assumption here, and Gandillac has a footnote which refers to Husserl: both assume that the meaning and the way in which meaning is produced are intentional acts. But meaning-function is certainly intent mode of meaning, the way in which in which I can try to mean is deeply [not] made by me, because I devices which I will be using, it is it is perhaps not even made by human that it is not at all certain that language with humanity — as Schiller did — human — if we obey the law, if we of language — there can be no integer there is no intent in the purely independently of the sense or the reality on both sides, both in the automatically means, misses a philosophically possibility of a phenomenology of language of establishing a poetics which

How are we to understand this “Art des Meinens,” between dire and dire German word Brot and the French to name bread, I have the word Brot using the word Brot. The translation between the intent to name Brot as a device of meaning. If you hear Bro mentioned in this text, I hear Brot in Hölderlin text that is very much possible to translate in French et vin. “Pain et vin” is what you get there is no intent to formalize this pain Brot et Wein. It brings to mind those things — I now hear in Brot quotation. I was very happy with the my native language is Flemish and have to think that Brot [brood] is It is all right in English because by the idiom “bread” for money, my quotidian, of my daily bread, the “bread,” daily bread, is upset by the way in which I mean — the term pain, which has its set of different direction.

This disjunction is best unders
original is unambiguous in that historical pathos, the pathos you are one who had discovered the essence, or this pathetic mixture human captures, which is present in what he says. It is not the Hölderlin is called the ”dürftiger the possible return of the gods. elegiac gesture, by means of which is lost, which then gives you this suffering, are specifically considerable linguistic structural like ”abyss” in the passage tables in the abyss of language, non-pithetic, technical sense in the kind of structure by means example of what it exemplifies. and the untranslatability which and will inhabit anybody who trying, and failing, to do. The translators who tried to do it, talk about it, it is an example of technical sense, a story within the Benjamin to speak of a suffering, initial work, or of any work to this Benjamin is very precise, inclusive theory of language. tells ”das Gemeinte,” what is such language means; between element means, and the way in difficulties of the translators are philosophical concepts that are of loss phenomenology and who riding philosophical pressure (p. 72). The way we would now is Meinens” would be by the "a priori," "to say." Zohn translates mention” (p. 74). There is a footnote which refers the way in which meaning is produced are intentional acts. But the problem is precisely that, whereas the meaning-function is certainly intentional, it is not a priori certain at all that the mode of meaning, the way in which I mean, is intentional in any way. The way in which I can try to mean is dependent upon linguistic properties that are not only [not] made by me, because I depend on the language as it exists for the devices which I will be using, it is as such not made by us as historical beings, it is perhaps not even made by humans at all. Benjamin says, from the beginning, that it is not at all certain that language is in any sense human. To equate language with humanity—as Schiller did—is in question. If language is not necessarily human—if we obey the law, if we function within language, and purely in terms of language—there can be no intent; there may be an intent of meaning, but there is no intent in the purely formal way in which we will use language independently of the sense or the meaning. The translation, which puts intentionality on both sides, both in the act of meaning and in the way in which one means, misses a philosophically interesting point—for what is at stake is the possibility of a phenomenology of language, or of poetic language, the possibility of establishing a poetics which would in any sense be a phenomenology of language.

How are we to understand this discrepancy between “das Gemeinte,” “Art des Meinens,” between dire and vouloir-dire? Benjamin’s example is the German word Brot and the French word pain. To mean “bread,” when I need to name bread, I have the word Brot, so that the way in which I mean is by using the word Brot. The translation will reveal a fundamental discrepancy between the intent to name Brot and the word Brot itself in its materiality, as a device of meaning. If you hear Brot in this context of Hölderlin, who is so often mentioned in this text, I hear Brot und Wein necessarily, which is the great Hölderlin text that is very much present in this—which in French becomes Pain et vin. “Pain et vin” is what you get for free in a restaurant, in a cheap restaurant where it is still included, so pain et vin has very different connotations from Brot und Wein. It brings to mind the pain français, baguette, ficelle, bâtarl. all those things— I now hear in Brot “bastard.” This upsets the stability of the quotidian. I was very happy with the word Brot, which I hear as a native because my native language is Flemish and you say brood, just like in German, but if I have to think that Brot [brood] and pain are the same thing, I get very upset. It is all right in English because “bread” is close enough to Brot [brood], despite the idiom “bread” for money, which has its problems. But the stability of my quotidian, of my daily bread, the reassuring quotidian aspects of the word “bread,” daily bread, is upset by the French word pain. What I mean is upset by the way in which I mean—the way in which it is pain, the phoneme, the term pain, which has its set of connotations which take you in a completely different direction.

This disjunction is best understood (to take it to a more familiar theoretical
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problem) in terms of the difficult relationship between the hermeneutics and the poetics of literature. When you do hermeneutics, you are concerned with the meaning of the work; when you do poetics, you are concerned with the stylistics or with the description of the way in which a work means. The question is whether these two are complementary, whether you can cover the full work by doing hermeneutics and poetics at the same time. The experience of trying to do this shows that it is not the case. When one tries to achieve this complementarity, the poetics always drops out, and what one always does is hermeneutics. One is so attracted by problems of meaning that it is impossible to do hermeneutics and poetics at the same time. From the moment you start to get involved with problems of meaning, as I unfortunately tend to do, forget about the poetics. The two are not complementary, the two may be mutually exclusive in a certain way, and that is part of the problem which Benjamin states, a purely linguistic problem.

He states a further version of this when he speaks of a disjunction between the word and the sentence, Wort and Satz. Satz in German means not just sentence, in the grammatical sense, it means statement — Heidegger will speak of Der Satz des Grundes; Satz is the statement, the most fundamental statement, meaning — the most meaningful word — whereas word is associated by Benjamin with Aussage, the way in which you state, as the apparent agent of the statement. Wort means not only the agent of the statement as a lexical unit, but also as syntax and as grammar: if you look at a sentence in terms of words, you look at it not just in terms of particular words but also in terms of the grammatical relationships between those words. So the question of the relationship between word and sentence becomes, for Benjamin, the question of the compatibility between grammar and meaning. What is being put in question is precisely that compatibility, which we take for granted in a whole series of linguistic investigations. Are grammar (word and syntax), on the one hand, and meaning (as it culminates in the Satz), on the other hand — are they compatible with each other? Does the one lead to the other, does the one support the other? Benjamin tells us that translation puts that conviction in question because, he says, from the moment that a translation is really literal, wörtlich, word by word, the meaning completely disappears. The example is again Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, which are absolutely literal, word by word, and which are therefore totally unintelligible; what comes out is completely incomprehensible, completely undoes the sentence, the Satz of Sophocles, which is entirely gone. The meaning of the word slips away (as we saw, a word like Aufgabe, which means task, also means something completely different, so that the word escapes us), and there is no grammatical way to control this slippage. There is also a complete slippage of the meaning when the translator follows the syntax, when he writes literally, wörtlich. And to some extent, a translator has to be wörtlich, has to be literal. The problem is best compared to the relationship between the letter and the word; the relationship between letter and word, namely, a-semantic, it is without a certain number of meaningless letters in each of the letters the word and meaning, Wort and Satz, is the word in which the letter can disappear and introduce in it a slippage by evanescence, and by means of which?

So we have, first, a disjunction between poetic and meaning, Wort and Satz, is the word in which the letter can disappear and introduce in it a slippage by evanescence, and by means of which?
The experience of trying to achieve this complementarity always does is hermeneutics. It is impossible to do hermeneutics unless you start to get involved with poetics. Forget about the poetics, mutually exclusive in a certain sense, a purely linguistic impossibility. As a disjunction between the hermeneutics and the poetic, we have a second one between grammar and meaning, and finally, we will have a disjunction, says Benjamin, between the symbol and what is being symbolized, a disjunction on the level of tropes between the trope as such and the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions. There is a similar and equally radical disjunction, between what tropes (which always imply totalization) convey in terms of totalization and what the tropes accomplish taken by themselves. That seems to be the main difficulty of this particular text, because the text is full of tropes, and it selects tropes which convey the illusion of totality. It seems to relapse into the tropological errors that it denounces. The text constantly uses images of seed, of ripening, of harmony, it uses the image of seed and rind (l’écorce et le noyau) — which seem to be derived from analogies between nature and language, whereas the claim is constantly being made that there are no such analogies. In the same way that history is not to be understood in terms of an analogy with nature, tropes should not be based on resemblances with nature. But that is precisely the difficulty and the challenge of this particular text. Whenever Benjamin uses a trope which seems to convey a picture of total meaning, of complete adequacy between figure and meaning, a figure of perfect synecdoche in which the partial trope expresses the totality of a meaning, he manipulates the allusive context within his work in such a way that the traditional symbol is displaced in a manner that acts out the discrepancy between symbol and meaning, rather than the acquiescence between both.

One striking example of that is the image of the amphora:

"Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. 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. For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate . . . (p. 78).

The relationship between word and sentence is like the relationship between letter and word; the relationship between letter and word, namely, the letter is without meaning in relation to the word, it is a-sémos, it is without meaning. When you spell a word you say a certain number of meaningless letters, which then come together in the word, but in each of the letters the word is not present. The two are absolutely independent of each other. What is being named here as the disjunction between grammar and meaning. Wort and Satz, is the materiality of the letter, the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost.

So we have, first, a disjunction in language between the hermeneutic and the poetic, we have a second one between grammar and meaning, and, finally, we will have a disjunction, says Benjamin, between the symbol and what is being symbolized, a disjunction on the level of tropes between the trope as such and the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions. There is a similar and equally radical disjunction, between what tropes (which always imply totalization) convey in terms of totalization and what the tropes accomplish taken by themselves. That seems to be the main difficulty of this particular text, because the text is full of tropes, and it selects tropes which convey the illusion of totality. It seems to relapse into the tropological errors that it denounces. The text constantly uses images of seed, of ripening, of harmony, it uses the image of seed and rind (l’écorce et le noyau) — which seem to be derived from analogies between nature and language, whereas the claim is constantly being made that there are no such analogies. In the same way that history is not to be understood in terms of an analogy with nature, tropes should not be based on resemblances with nature. But that is precisely the difficulty and the challenge of this particular text. Whenever Benjamin uses a trope which seems to convey a picture of total meaning, of complete adequacy between figure and meaning, a figure of perfect synecdoche in which the partial trope expresses the totality of a meaning, he manipulates the allusive context within his work in such a way that the traditional symbol is displaced in a manner that acts out the discrepancy between symbol and meaning, rather than the acquiescence between both.
According to this image, there is an original, pure language, of which any particular work is only a fragment. That would be fine, provided we could, through that fragment, find access again to the original work. The image is that of a vessel, of which the literary work would be a piece, and then the translation is a piece of that. It is admitted that the translation is a fragment; but if the translation relates to the original as a fragment relates, if the translation would reconstitute as such the original, then—although it does not resemble it, but matches it perfectly (as in the word symbolon, which states the matching of two pieces or two fragments)—then we can think of any particular work as being a fragment of the pure language, and then indeed Benjamin’s statement would be a religious statement about the fundamental unity of language.

Benjamin has told us, however, that the symbol and what it symbolizes, the trope and what it seems to represent, do not correspond. How is this to be made compatible with a statement like the one made here? An article by Carol Jacobs called “The Monstrosity of Translation,” which appeared in Modern Language Notes, treats this passage in a way which strikes me as exceedingly precise and correct. First, she is aware of the Kabbalistic meaning of the text, by referring to Gershom Scholem, who in writing about this text relates the figure of the angel to the history of the Tikkun of the Lurianic Kabbalah:

Yet at the same time Benjamin has in mind the Kabbalistic concept of the Tikkun, the messianic restoration and mending which patches together and restores the original Being of things, shattered and corrupted in the “Breaking of Vessels,” and also [the original being of] history.

Carol Jacobs comments:

Scholem might have turned to “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers,” where the image of the broken vessel plays a more direct role. . . . Yet whereas Zohn suggests that a totality of fragments are brought together, Benjamin insists that the final outcome is still “a broken part.”

All you have to do, to see that, is translate correctly, instead of translating like Zohn—who made this difficult passage very clear—but who in the process of making it clear made it say something completely different. Zohn said, “fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest detail.” Benjamin said, translated by Carol Jacobs word by word, “fragments of a vessel, in order to be articulated together”—which is much better than glued together, which has a totally irrelevant concreteness—“must follow one another in the smallest detail”—which is not at all the same as match one another. What is already present in this difference is that we have folgen, not gleichen, not to match. We have a metonymic, a successive pattern, in which things follow, rather than a metaphorical unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance. They do not match each other, they follow each other; they are already metonyms and not metaphors toward a convincing tropological totality.

But things get more involved, or so it seems to me. So, instead of making itself similar to the original, the translation must reconstitute the original, form itself according to the original, to make both recognizable as fragments of a greater language.

That is entirely different from saying that in the same way a translation, if it is to make the original language, form itself according to the original, to make both recognizable as fragments of a greater language, “Just as fragments are part of a vessel,” as Zohn says, Benjamin, “are the broken parts of a vessel which are to be glued together. . . . Yet whereas Zohn suggests that a totality of fragments are brought together, Benjamin insists that the final outcome is still ‘a broken part.’”

Therefore the distinction between a symbol to a shattered symbolization, is a version of the others, an array of tropes which would be displaced with regard to the meaning reached. Benjamin approaches the domain of faithfulness, the question of translation, and faithfulness, the question of idiomatic relevance of the target language, as fragments of a greater language.
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ning of the text, by referring
text relates the figure of the
Kabbalah:
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Übersetzer’s,“ where the
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part.5

rectly, instead of translating
clear — but who in the process
different. Zohn said, “frag-
must match one another in the
Carol Jacobs word by word,
other” — which is much
relevant concreteness — “must
not at all the same as match
ence is that we have folgen,
a successive pattern, in which
pattern in which things become
, they follow each other; they

are already metonyms and not metaphors; as such they are certainly less working
toward a convincing tropological totalization than if we use the term “match.”

But things get more involved, or more distorted, in what follows.

So, instead of making itself similar to the meaning, to the 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 parts of the
greater language, just as fragments are the broken parts of a vessel.

That is entirely different from saying, as Zohn says:

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.

“Just as fragments are part of a vessel” is a synecdoche; “just as fragments,”
says Benjamin, “are the broken parts of a vessel”; as such he is not saying that
the fragments constitute a totality, he says the fragments are fragments, and that
they remain essentially fragmentary. They follow each other up, metonymically,
and they will never constitute a totality. I’m reminded of an example I heard
given by the French philosopher Michel Serres — that you find out about frag-
ments by doing the dishes: if you break a dish it breaks into fragments, but you
can’t break the fragments any more. That’s an optimistic, a positive synecdochal
view of the problem of fragments, because there the fragments can make up a
whole, and you cannot break up the fragments. What we have here is an initial
fragmentation; any work is totally fragmented in relation to this reine Sprache,
with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is totally fragmented
in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is
breaking the fragment — so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly — and never
reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge
of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes
there has never been one.

Therefore the distinction between symbol and symbolized, the nonadequation
of symbol to a shattered symbolized, the nonsymbolic character of this adequa-
tion, is a version of the others, and indicates the unreliability of rhetoric as a
system of tropes which would be productive of a meaning. Meaning is always
displaced with regard to the meaning it ideally intended — that meaning is never
reached. Benjamin approaches the question in terms of the aporia between free-
dom and faithfulness, the question which haunts the problem of translation. Does
translation have to be faithful, or does it have to be free? For the sake of the
idiomatic relevance of the target language, it has to be free; on the other hand,
it has to be faithful, to some extent, to the original. The faithful translation,
which is always literal, how can it also be free? It can only be free if it reveals the instability of the original, and if it reveals that instability as the linguistic tension between trope and meaning. Pure language is perhaps more present in the translation than in the original, but in the mode of trope. Benjamin, who is talking about the inability of trope to be adequate to meaning, constantly uses the very tropes which seem to postulate the adequate between meaning and trope; but he prevents them in a way, displaces them in such a way as to put the original in motion, to de-canonize the original, giving it a movement which is a movement of disintegration, of fragmentation. This movement of the original is a wandering, an errance, a kind of permanent exile if you wish, but it is not really an exile, for there is no homeland, nothing from which one has been exiled. Least of all is there something like a reine Sprache, a pure language, which does not exist except as a permanent disjunction which inhabits all languages as such, including and especially the language one calls one’s own. What is to be one’s own language is the most displaced, the most alienated of all.

Now it is this motion, this errancy of language which never reaches the mark, which is always displaced in relation to what it meant to reach, it is this errancy of language, this illusion of a life that is only an afterlife, that Benjamin calls history. As such, history is not human, because it pertains strictly to the order of language; it is not natural, for the same reason; it is not phenomenal, in the sense that no cognition, no knowledge about man, can be derived from a history which as such is purely a linguistic complication; and it is not really temporal either, because the structure that animates it is not a temporal structure. Those disjunctions in language do get expressed by temporal metaphors, but they are only metaphors. The dimension of futurity, for example, which is present in it, is not temporal but is the correlative of the figural pattern and the disjunctive power which Benjamin locates in the structure of language. History, as Benjamin conceives it, is certainly not messianic, since it consists in the rigorous separation and the acting out of the separation of the sacred from the poetic, the separation of the reine Sprache from poetic language. Reine Sprache, the sacred language, has nothing in common with poetic language; poetic language does not resemble it, poetic language does not depend on it, poetic language has nothing to do with it. It is within this negative knowledge of its relation to the language of the sacred that poetic language initiates. It is, if you want, a necessarily nihilistic moment that is necessary in any understanding of history.

Benjamin said this in the clearest of terms, not in this essay but in another text called “Theological and Political Fragment,” from which I will quote a short passage in conclusion. He said it with all possible clarity, it seemed to me, until I tried to translate that particular passage, and found that English happens to have a property which makes it impossible to translate. Here is the passage:

Only the messiah himself puts an end to everything that is historical. It cannot be posited as an end, but its end.

That is where I have a great deal of worry. The word for “aim” can also be “end” and the means by which you achieve a goal just as well as the word Ziel as it can mean the goal itself. The term “end” in English “end,” the two things which Benjamin says cannot be posited as ends, cannot be used as a term for the termination of history.

And Benjamin adds:

To have denied the political significance of the religious ideal with all desirable intensity is the essence of Utopia.

Since we saw that what is here at issue is linguistic reasons, we can in this part of the text make the point that the aspect of history is that of a political aspect, so that political and poetical here are the sacred. To the extent that such a thing as a theocracy is not a theocracy but a rhetoric, it has to do with the notion of modernity, which is essentially theological notion. Yolande canni’s claim to modernity, is associated with the word “Spirit.” We have seen, and it is for me gratifying to note, Gadamer’s claim to modernity, in section of the Aesthetics on the separation between sacred and profane, ”The Task of the Translator” that
Only the messiah himself puts an end to history, in the sense that it frees, completely fulfills the relationship of history to the messianic. Therefore, nothing that is truly historical can want to relate by its own volition to the messianic. Therefore, the kingdom of God is not the telos of the dynamics of history, it cannot be posited as its aim; seen historically it is not its aim but its end.

That is where I have a great deal of trouble with English, because the English word for "aim" can also be "end." You say "the end and the means," the aim and the means by which you achieve it. And the English word "end" can mean just as well Ziel as it can mean Ende. My end, my intention. So that if we want to use that idiom, the translation then becomes: "seen historically it is not its end but its end," its termination—it would be perfect English. But it would indicate that the separation which is here undertaken by Benjamin is hidden in this word "end" in English, which substitutes for "aim" the word "end," the two things which Benjamin asks us to keep rigorously apart.

And Benjamin adds:

To have denied the political significance of theocracy, to have denied the political significance of the religious, messianic view, to have denied this with all desirable intensity is the great merit of Bloch's book The Spirit of Utopia.

Since we saw that what is here called political and historical is due to purely linguistic reasons, we can in this passage replace "political" by "poetical," in the sense of a poetics. For we now see that the nonmessianic, nonsacred, that is the political aspect of history is the result of the poetical structure of language, so that political and poetical here are substituted, in opposition to the notion of the sacred. To the extent that such a poetics, such a history, is nonmessianic, not a theocracy but a rhetoric, it has no room for certain historical notions such as the notion of modernity, which is always a dialectical, that is to say an essentially theological notion. You will remember that we started out from Gadamer's claim to modernity, in terms of a dialectic which was explicitly associated with the word "Spirit," with the spirituality in the text of Hegel. We have seen, and it is for me gratifying to find, that Hegel himself—when, in the section of the Aesthetics on the sublime, he roots the sublime in this same separation between sacred and profane—is actually much closer to Benjamin in "The Task of the Translator" than he is to Gadamer.
Questions

de Man: I'll be glad to take questions of a more general nature. If there are questions you want to bring up that pertain not just to Benjamin but to other problems that have been raised, I'll be happy to try to answer them . . . . I have deliberately . . . Yes?

Billy Flesch: Is it necessary to see intention as subjective . . .

de Man: No.

Flesch: . . . or can you have intention, can you get rid of the subject without being left only with language?

de Man: Well, intention is not seen here as necessarily subjective, but it is seen as necessarily semantic. Intention is inseparable from the concept of meaning; any meaning is to some extent intentional. Any language oriented to meaning is at least intentional, precisely by virtue of the fact that it intends meaning. Intention is, therefore, not subjective. Intention in Husserl, in phenomenology as it establishes itself as a serious philosophical discipline, is not simply subjective, it is rather primarily a critique of the notion of the subject as simply the expression of its own wishfulness, or something of the sort. But intentionality always has a semantic function; intentionality is always directed toward a meaning, toward the explicit meaning — that is always intentional. It is always a visée. Gandillac's translation is correct in speaking of a visée intentionelle — the language aims at, sets itself as the target, the meaning which it sets. As such, it is not subjective, but it is semantically determined — semantically rather than semiotically, if you want — as it would be in a poetics as opposed to a hermeneutics. A hermeneutics is always intentional, to the extent that it is a description of technical devices which exist independently of the meaning at which they aim, and are not determined by the intentional gesture in any sense. Yes? I'll get to you in a second.

Neil Hertz: I want to pick up on the relation between the transpersonal and the inhuman.

de Man: Right.

Hertz: Because it seems that — I'm talking about the moment when you were talking about poetry — and Brot — and pain — . . .

de Man: Right, uh huh.

Hertz: When you give that as an instance, you tend to adduce the kinds of connotations that words develop over a long time and historical culture, so that their quotidian feel, for you, is in some relation to the fact that Hölderlin wrote a poem, and that Christians do certain things with bread, and so forth and so on. Now, all of those instances are individual user of language, but the . . .

de Man: No.

Hertz: And it's that movement that place.

de Man: Right, well . . .

Hertz: Now suppose you put this in imagine that the totality that you forget which of those terms is what . . .

de Man: You can apprehend, to a can't comprehend what you appreh . . .

Hertz: Imagine a sequence of app take in Hölderlin, you take in a with the Christian connotation and so for apprehensions about pain, that g that the moment when the word "the breakdown of those acts of ap because there are a whole series of that lose connotations, and they get some of them, one poem by Höld . . .

Hertz: — because that's an import de Man: Right.

Hertz: — because that's an import de Man: Right.

Hertz: At the same time, the word the mysterious. You no? [laughs] mode of terror, but just in a mode something that's the Inhuman, like de Man: Yah.

Hertz: It's become a singular noun de Man: Yah.

Hertz: It's that transition I'm put contingent impossibility — to rec term, like the "Inhuman."

de Man: Well, you're quite right
on. Now, all of those instances add up to what’s beyond your control as an individual user of language, but they don’t quite add up to the inhuman.

de Man: No.

Hertz: And it’s that movement that I want — there’s a mediation in there somewhere.

de Man: Right, well . . .

Hertz: Now suppose you put this in connection with the mathematical sublime — imagine that the totality that you are trying to apprehend, or comprehend, I forget which of those terms is what you can’t do and which one you can do —

de Man: You can apprehend, to a certain point, but after a certain point you can’t comprehend what you apprehend.

Hertz: Imagine a sequence of apprehensions about the meaning of Brot. You take in Hölderlin, you take in a whole series of other German ones, you take in the Christian connotation and so forth and so on; similarly you’ve got a series of apprehensions about pain, that goes off in its own direction. It’s conceivable that the moment when the word “inhuman” comes to mind is the moment of the breakdown of those acts of apprehension. That’s very prosaic. I mean it’s because there are a whole series of events, in what we ordinarily call history, that lose connotations, and they get lost, one loses track of them; and we name some of them, one poem by Hölderlin, we can’t name others, and so forth and so on. It seems to me that you want to hold on to the prosaic nature of the inhuman —

de Man: Right.

Hertz: — because that’s an important word in your own discourse.

de Man: Right.

Hertz: At the same time, the word “inhuman” keeps pulling in the direction of the mysterious. You no? [laughed] Not for you? Maybe it doesn’t. Not in a mode of terror, but just in a mode of the substantiation and the individuation of something that’s the Inhuman, like the Sublime . . .

de Man: Yah.

Hertz: It’s become a singular noun, covering a series of failed apprehensions.

de Man: Yah.

Hertz: It’s that transition I’m puzzled by, how you get from what’s really a contingent impossibility — to reconstruct the connotations of Brot — to a major term, like the “Inhuman.”

de Man: Well, you’re quite right. I was indulging myself, you know, it was
long, and I was very aware of potential boredom, felt the need for an anecdote, for some relief, and Benjamin gives the example of *pain* and *Brot*, and perhaps shouldn’t . . . whenever you give an example you, as you know, lose what you want to say; and Benjamin, by giving the example of *pain* and *Brot*—which comes from him—and which I’ve banalized, for the sake of a cheap laugh. . . . Well, as you say, it went from a problem of apprehension, comprehension—which is a simple tropological problem—you come to the inhuman, which Benjamin mentions in a somewhat different context from that of *pain* and *Brot*—I should not have quoted that—but that is still very human, what happens there. The “inhuman,” however, is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have. So that, more than nature, toward which one can have, toward which one sets up, a human rapport—which is illegitimate, as illegitimate as turns out to be, in the final run, the interpersonal rapport, which is illegitimate too, since there is, in a very radical sense, no such thing as the human. If one speaks of the inhuman, the fundamental non-human character of language, one also speaks of the fundamental non-definition of the human as such, since the word human doesn’t correspond to anything like that. So by extension, any . . . but let’s not go that far—I’m now ahead of the statement . . . . What in language does not pertain to the human, what in language is unlike nature and is not assimilable, or doesn’t resemble, what in language does not resemble the human in any way, is totally indifferent in relation to the human, is not therefore mysterious: it is eminently prosaic, and what happens—what is precisely interesting, I think—is that Benjamin’s language of pathos, language of historical pathos, language of messianic, the pathos of exile and so on and so forth, really describes linguistic events which are by no means human. So that what he calls the pains of the original become structural deficiencies which are best analyzed in terms of the inhuman, dehumanized language of linguistics, rather than into the language of imagery, or tropes, of pathos, or drama, which he chooses to use in a very peculiar way. To the extent that this text is human, all too human in the appeal it makes to you, and its messianic overtones to name something which is essentially nonhuman, it displaces our sense of what is human, both in ourselves and in our relationship to other humans. In a very fundamental way, I think. So that, from the statement that language is not human, that history is not human, which is made at the beginning, we are now brought to see something about the human which goes beyond that in that sense . . . whether it is mysterious, whether that is inhuman, or whether that is . . . the sacred, or something, one is impelled to read *reine Sprache* as that which is the most sacred, which is the most divine, when in fact in Benjamin it means a language completely devoid of any kind of meaning function, language which would be pure signifier, which would be completely devoid of any semiotic function—language which it would be possible to call divine or sacred. You can call that divine or sacred in that sense, I think, though it is part of the original. . . .

Unidentified: I’m a little concerned with the way that you handled it, you talked about translation goes beyond the original, if the original loses its sacred character, it’s a translation. . . .

*de Man:* Well, that would precisely be the point, we have here an example of how translation goes beyond the original, and the translation can be interpreted as a translation. . . . Well, I translated—I certainly didn’t get the piece of Wilkinson’s, I would relate to the translation—this piece of Wilkinson’s, I translated—I certainly didn’t get the feeling there—this piece of Wilkinson’s, I would relate to the prosaic nature of the translation, which is written in English, but I translated—I certainly didn’t get there—this piece of Wilkinson’s, I would relate to the translation—this piece of Wilkinson’s, I would relate to the translation. . . .

Deleuze: Yes. But to talk about translation goes beyond the original, if the translation is prosaic, if the prosaic nature of the original is prosaic, how can one talk about translation goes beyond the original, if the translation is prosaic? As such, the translation is a prosaic nature of the original, a translation is a making prosaic of the original. As such, the translation is a prosaic nature of the original, a translation is a making prosaic of the original. . . .
felt the need for an anecdote, of *pain* and *Brot*, and perhaps
you, as you know, lose what
tuple of *pain* and *Brot*—which
for the sake of a cheap laugh.

*...* comprehension—which
the inhuman, which Benjamin
talks of *pain* and *Brot*—I should
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pathos, language of the mes-
ach, really describes linguistic
he calls the pains of the
best analyzed in terms of the
her than into the language of
the chooses to use in a very
all too human in the appeal
be something which is essen-
human, both in ourselves and
mental way, I think. So that,
story is not human, which
is something about the human
whether it is mysterious, whether
for something, one is impelled
ked, which is the most divine,
pletely devoid of any kind of
signifier, which would be
completely devoid of any semantic function whatsoever, a purely technical lin-
guistic language—and it would be purely limited to its own linguistic character-
istics. You can call that divine or sacred, if you want, but it is not mysterious in
that sense, I think, though it is paradoxical in the extreme. ... 

*Unidentified:* I’m a little concerned about what became of the original. In the
way that you handled it, you talked about the destabilization of the original, and
that translation goes beyond the original. There’s a problem for me, because
what happens to the original, if the original becomes nonexistent? [ ... ] I
don’t know what to do with it. I understand what you were doing, but I don’t
understand what happens in terms of the original, at least in terms of, let’s say,
pragmatic usage.

*de Man:* Well, that would precisely be what is impossible. This is irreversibility
again, we have here an example of irreversibility, to the extent that you could
not possibly get from the translation back to an original. Somebody who would
have a translation and—well yesterday I was reading a piece of ordinary profes-
sional prose, I was translating with some discomfort Mrs. Wilkinson’s text,7
which is written in English, but I happen to have only a German translation, so
I translated—I certainly didn’t get the original. Whatever I have produced
there—this piece of Wilkinson’s, which still I give the name of Wilkinson,
would perhaps be, would relate to the original in a very interesting way, which
would raise some questions about the nature of what she had originally said
there. I certainly have stressed things which I want to see, that she didn’t want
to see, and so on, so that that text is destabilized by that. What happens to the
original? First of all Benjamin says: take the notion of *Fortleben*, of survival,
in the most literal sense possible, take it as literally as you can take it, it is the
survival of the text, the text is kept in circulation, by the translation, circulation
is augmented as such in the process. But what happens to the original,
which is your question—there are many words for it, it is decanonized, it
is—you are made aware of certain disjunctions, certain disruptions, certain
accommodations, certain weaknesses, certain cheatings, certain conventions,
certain characteristics which don’t correspond to the *claim* of the original, so
that the original loses its sacred character—of being the original in any sense
— one of the sacred characters it loses is that of its claim of originality, because
a translation brings out all that is idiomatic, all that is customary, all that is
prosaic. As such, the translation is a making prosaic of what *appeared* to be poetic in the original.

*de Man:* I think can be said—the original is disarticulated, the original is
duced to the status of prose, is decanonized, all that by the process of translation,
because the impossibility of translation is due to disruptions which are there in the original, but which the original managed to hide — in the same way that Benjamin manages to hide, from the reader, from the translator, from everybody who reads this text, manages to hide, for example, the inadequacy of any symbol in relation to what it means, by using symbols which are particularly convincing, which are particularly seductive, and which seem precisely to achieve what they want to achieve, what they mean to achieve. He does it, and as such he produces an original text which has the beauty and seduction of an original text, and generally Benjamin gets praised for the magnificence of his images, and so on and so forth; but they are quite perverse in the way in which they undo the claim that is associated with them. The translation is a way of reading the original which will reveal those inherent weaknesses in the original, not in the sense that the original is then no longer a great work or anything, or that it wouldn't be worthy of admiration or anything of the sort, but in a much more fundamental way: that the original is not canonical, that the original is a piece of ordinary language, in a way — prosaic, ordinary language — which as such belongs as much to that category as [to the category of original]. It is desacralized. Decanonized, desacralized, in a very fundamental way. If you then think of the original as being Dante or Pindar, and you put that next to the way in which those authors are constantly sacralized — then you started from the notion of George, as the one who sacralizes the notion of the poet — then you would see, in a sense, what happens to the original. Yes?

Richard Klein: I just want to go back to what Neil was saying about the Inhuman. I wonder if there would be some inhumanness that one could attach for example to the problems of translation, say, if from *ode* to *tableau*, there would be an inhumanity that wouldn't belong to the nature of the mathematical sublime, let's say wouldn't have to do with the inexhaustible, infinite connotations inherent in language, making it impossible ever to stop the process of translation, but that would be a kind of . . . which would imply a sort of abyss if you like, to get back to that term — but the sort of specular abyss like when you see a mirror in a mirror, the images keep on getting smaller and smaller. But this would be that other kind of abyss that you mentioned, where the relationship would be the terms that are being translated to one another, have that kind of a negative synecdochal relationship of a part which is a part of a whole of which it is not a part — somehow more than a whole, and that would emblematize in the inhuman way which the translations of Benjamin were constantly founding their own inhumanity, requiring their position as parts of what they were . . .

de Man: Well, I see. In a way, what Gandillac, and Zohn too — very nice gentlemen, especially Zohn, who's very nice — Gandillac a little less — but at least they're human! — what they did to Benjamin is inhuman! It's inhuman not to see that *nicht* is there, that's not human. Humanely, you would see that; but it's not mechanical either, it's just *se fait pas*, it's scandalous! It's scandalous . . . indeed along these lines. "In concept here. Well, it's a little bit quizzical, let's not go into that, this not . . .

Meyer Abrams: I want to go back to raised about language being something on which one makes such a claim.

Abrams: . . . not to oppose your . . . to provide a different perspective, in a way. And that perspective won't fit and expect it from me.

de Man: That's very human.

Abrams: Suppose I should say, as of being the nonhuman, language in the world, in that language is syntax, tropes, and all the other . . . since they are part of the language which involves regularities of . . .

Meyer Abrams: . . . not to oppose your . . . to provide a different perspective, in a way. And that perspective won't fit and expect it from me.

de Man: Sure.

Abrams: Suppose I should say, as of being the nonhuman, language in the world, in that language is syntax, tropes, and all the other . . . since they are part of the language which involves regularities of . . .

Meyer Abrams: . . . not to oppose your . . . to provide a different perspective, in a way. And that perspective won't fit and expect it from me.

de Man: Sure.
It’s not mechanical either, it’s just inhuman! I don’t know what to say — ça ne se fait pas, it’s scandalous! It’s scandalous in that sense, right? It would indeed be . . . indeed along these lines. “Inhuman” becomes a curious and all-invading concept here. Well, it’s a little bit qualified in that Benjamin — because . . . well, let’s not go into that, this notion of the inhuman. Mike?

Meyer Abrams: I want to go back to the question that Neil, Professor Neil Hertz, raised about language being somehow opposed to the human. And the grounds on which one makes such a claim. I want to do what I did yesterday . . .

de Man: That’s very human.

Abrams: . . . not to oppose your claim, not even to complement it, but simply to provide a different perspective, just so we can settle the matter in another way. And that perspective won’t surprise you because you’ve heard it before and expect it from me.

de Man: That’s very human.

Abrams: Suppose I should say, as many people have said before me, that instead of being the nonhuman, language is the most human of all the things we find in the world, in that language is entirely the product of human beings. That syntax, tropes, and all the other operations of language, are equally human, since they are part of the language. Human beings develop a language system which involves regularities of some sort, on which we can play, otherwise language wouldn’t be language — you would have a unique instance every time you said something. That would not only be nonsystemic, it would be nonsense. Now, suppose that, alternatively to looking at the play of grammar, syntax, trope, as somehow opposed to meaning, I should say — and I’m not alone in saying this — that language, through all these aspects, doesn’t get between itself and the meaning — but instead that language, when used by people, makes its meanings. So that meanings are not something we can oppose to language, but are something that language, when used by people, means. Now in that case, both language and meaning become the intrinsically human, the most human of things. By such a criterion, I can say, as many people have indeed said: What can be more human than the language which distinguishes human beings from all other living things? You know the play of this dialectic.

de Man: Sure.

Abrams: So we end up with a scene in which language, which you say is something opposed to the human and opposed to meaning, is the most human of things, and makes its meanings, to which it cannot be opposed — unless you establish alternative criteria of meaning which make it opposable to what language in fact says. Now, it seems to me that in doing so you are making a move that falls into the trap of some of the people you oppose, in which somehow meaning...
exists independently of language as it tries to make meaning. Is there a paradox there? I’m not sure. But at any rate, all I want to do is present the humanistic perspective, as an alternative, an optional alternative, which appeals to me. Instinctively, it appeals to me.

de Man: Well, it appeals to me also, greatly; and there is no question of its appeal, and its desirability. There is no question that language means, and that language . . . Let’s get back to our text. Benjamin is not talking of the ordinary use of language. He’s not speaking of the quotidian use, or of the poetic as an extension — or a sublimation, or whatever you want to call it — in which one would think of poetic language as being just more meaning, more expressive, richer, more complex meaning than other — but always meaning. He is not speaking of the ordinary use of language. He’s speaking of the very peculiar, unusual, and uncommon element in language called translation: something that language allows one to do, which is translation within language. Translation, which presupposes meaning, and which presupposes a circulation of meaning, whether it is within the same language, whether it is in — the way we are interchanging language now, in the way I translate what you’re saying, I can . . . so on and so forth — and he discovers a difficulty. There is a difficulty inherent in translation. And moreover, this seems to be the case, because the translators of his own text seem to run into similar difficulties. The suggestion is not that language doesn’t mean; the suggestion is that there is a question about the semantic value of language. Desirable as it is, and indispensable as it is, of course — go back to Eisenhower and religion: “We must have language!” No, that is somewhere else . . . They asked Eisenhower what to do about religion, and he said, “We must have it!” The same is true about language as meaning: we must have it. Imagine that we didn’t! Nobody is suggesting that we should do away with it. But there is a question, a question of language. Let’s transpose it within the historical scheme which you bring up: the notion of the definition of man by his language. Man is the animal that speaks, is the speaking animal. There is that historical topos which comes back, and one thinks of Haniann, one thinks of some others, and it says — and that is to some extent Benjamin’s concern here — “At the beginning was the word.” Language is not human, it is God-given: it is the logos, as that which God gives to man. Not specifically to man, but God gives, as such. That’s not at all the same as to say man is man to the extent that he has language. And there is — well, I don’t have to tell you — there is a constant danger between this notion of language as revealed trope — and as such not being human in any sense, something which man receives, as such, at a certain moment, and with which he has nothing to do — and the other notion of language as that which man has elaborated in a sense, as he goes about it pragmatically, justifying all those funny theories of language in the eighteenth century, where you argue whether they began with nouns or with verbs — this whole notion of language as natural...
whole notion of language as natural process, versus language as divinely revealed. That it is divine or not makes little difference, and the more you take the sacred out of this picture, the better. But it indicates a constant problem about the nature of language as being either human or nonhuman. That there is a nonhuman aspect of language is a perennial awareness from which we cannot escape, because language does things which are so radically out of our control that they cannot be assimilated to the human at all, against which one fights constantly. So, I don’t think that — the humanistic perspective is obviously there, there is no question that it has to be there — it is from the moment that a certain kind of critical examination — and that examination has to take place, it has to take place not out of some perversity, not out of some hubris of critical thought or anything of the sort, it has to take place because it addresses the question of what actually happens. Things happen in the world which cannot be accounted for in terms of the human conception of language. And they always happen in linguistic terms, or the relation [to] language is always involved when they have [happened]. And good or bad things, not only catastrophes, but felicities also. And they happen. In a sense, to account for them, to account for them historically, to account for them in any sense, a certain initial discrepancy in language has to be examined. You can’t — it cannot be avoided. Philosophy has never been able to avoid the question of the proper nature . . . never, never, no matter in what way it presented itself, however it presented itself as it inheres to language. Philosophy originates in this difficulty about the nature of language which is as such . . . and which is a difficulty about the definition of the human, or a difficulty within the human as such. And I think there is no escape from that.

Abrams: Let me indicate the extent to which I agree with you, very briefly. Of course translation is impossible, if you establish criteria for the exact translation from one language to another which makes translation unachievable. But one way of putting the matter is to say that each of the two is a different language, and that each language makes its own meanings. So I wouldn’t oppose what Benjamin said, although some of the ways in which he gets at the matter puzzle me. Your second point I also agree with, but I would put it that what’s wrong is not the operation of language but theories of language. It puzzles me that one tends, in making language problematic, to project upon language claims that seem to me rather to be applicable to theories of language. One such claim, for example, is that language deconstructs itself, when one seems actually to be claiming that no theory of language that anyone has ever proposed is unproblematic, so that all theories are self-destructive. And so while I could accept everything you’ve said, I would put it in this form: What’s problematic is the theorization; language only becomes problematic when we theorize about it.

de Man: Yes, on the other hand . . .
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Abrams: We use it. We may use it well or we may use it ill; we make it work, but sometimes it doesn’t work — there’s nothing inherently problematic about that.

de Man: Yes, but precisely — we can continue this, but just one more statement: theorization, the theorization of language, is initially and fundamentally a part of language. And I won’t refer to what, in Benjamin — again, to bring it back to this particular text, and to the historical context of this particular text — the context of that is Friedrich Schlegel — this, a certain type of German Romanticism, which has . . . which Benjamin knows very well where it comes from, in which he has his allegiance — where precisely the necessary element of theorization in language, the fact that criticism — what is called by Friedrich Schlegel criticism — and poetry are inseparable. That there is no poetry without criticism of poetry, and that the two necessarily involve each other. I give this the merest name “theorization.” The theorization is inherent in language. A language which would not be — and this has nothing to do with common and ordinary language: there’s nothing more theoretical than the language on the street, than the common language which . . . The only people who believe that there is language that is not theoretical are professors of literature. They are the only ones who think . . . If you ask the people, they know that language is theoretical, that language is always, and that language is constantly — with the people, whoever that is. If you get popular uses of language, they are highly, infinitely theoretical, they are constantly turning back upon language. Or if you see what mass manifestations of language, or mythologies are, they are always highly theorized. The notion of separating theory is a very understandable, nostalgic move in our profession, I’m afraid . . . I think so, I’m afraid.

Dominick LaCapra: It seems to me that, from what you’re saying, it’s not simply a question of a humanistic perspective, but that there is a sense in which, let’s say, hermeneutics and poetics are compatible in the somewhat paradoxical sense that they have to suffer one another, in a rather strange way — in that sense metaphors of marriage might not be altogether out of place — but what struck me as really disconcerting in what you were saying, is that, on the left today, I think Benjamin is being introduced as someone who gives us all of the . . . all the subtlety of contemporary French criticism, with a political dimension that’s very much identified with messianic hope and utopianism.

de Man: Right.

LaCapra: And from what you’re arguing, I think that . . .

de Man: This is not just from what I’m arguing, this is on the basis of what Benjamin very openly and directly says. But when he says “ja,” one understands “nein.” And when he says “nein,” one understands “ja.” And that’s very interesting: how this particular combination of Benjamin’s political and critical powers, with some kind of affirmation, lies. And that should be resisted, to his approval of Bloch. Some readers of Bloch’s book on *The Spirit of Utopia*, which argues absolutely against the nihilistic stance at that moment, Whereas — and one would feel closer to certain elements in Nietzsche, he spent his entire life holding at bay, in this unhappy misinterpretation of . . . to make Benjamin say the opposite that has to do with . . . But the . . . of Benjamin is shot through with many . . . as a desire in Benjamin, but which extraordinarily refined and deliberate struggle to enter his text, but then displacing attentive reading would reveal then. He succeeded so well in in you — it takes really a long practice back to this text, I think I have it now. I don’t understand it. I again see a of the text which I have not discussed take work on my part to insert what The reason I haven’t done it is the . . . the interlinear and so on. I would refer . . . we again to Carol Jacobs’s article, who job. Yes?

Tom Reinert: Can you elaborate on to occurrences yesterday, in a way

de Man: Occurrence. I suppose now — yesterday, too. In Benjamin there is a constant drifting, there is the movement is that of a constant alienation in a sense, that persists. “Theologico-Political Fragment,” nihilism as such. One could say, you company, and with all kinds of . . . a small company — that Benjamin’s have to be understood as a very particular that in Nietzsche nihilism is the n

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powers, with some kind of affirmation of messianic futurity — that way madness
lies. And that should be resisted, to some extent. Take that very simple statement:
his approval of Bloch. Some reservations about Adorno, but the approval of
Bloch's book on The Spirit of Utopia. Unreserved approval of it, of the book
which argues absolutely against the messianic. It's much better. Because at least
a nihilistic stance at that moment is possibly preparatory to a historical act.
Whereas — and one would feel closer to Nietzsche there — Benjamin would be
closer to certain elements in Nietzsche than he is to a messianic tradition which
he spent his entire life holding at bay. The man who bears a strong responsibility
in this unhappy misinterpretation of Benjamin is Scholem, who deliberately tried
to make Benjamin say the opposite of what he said for ends of his own. But
that has to do with . . . But the theme of the Frankfurt School interpretation
of Benjamin is shot through with messianic elements which certainly are there,
as a desire in Benjamin, but which Benjamin managed to control by an extraor­
dinarily refined and deliberate strategy of both echoing themes, allowing them
to enter his text, but then displacing them in his text in such a way that an
attentive reading would reveal them. That attentive reading is very difficult to
give. He succeeded so well in incorporating them in their displacement that
you — it takes really a long practice — it's always lost again. Whenever I go
back to this text, I think I have it more or less, then I read it again, and again
I don't understand it. I again see a messianic appeal. There are many aspects
of the text which I have not discussed, and which would in a sense, which would
take work on my part to insert what I'm trying to say, especially at the end.
The reason I haven't done it is not that . . . but there is a limit to time, but
the end is . . . the interlinear commentary, you know, translation of Scripture,
and so on. I would refer . . . well, to those who are interested in it, I refer
again to Carol Jacobs's article, which does on that particular piece a very good
job. Yes?

Tom Reinert: Can you elaborate on your notion of historical events? You referred
to occurrences yesterday, in a way I found slightly obscure.

de Man: Occurrence. I suppose I've said that, used that a couple of times
now — yesterday, too. In Benjamin, things don't seem to occur so much . . .
there is a constant drifting, there is a constant (I said) errance, a constant . . .
the movement is that of a constant displacement, of a constant exile, of a constant
alienation in a sense, that persists. Actually, the text from which I quoted, the
"Theologico-Political Fragment," ends up on the word "nihilism," and mentions
nihilism as such. One could say, with all kinds of precautions, and in the right
company, and with all kinds of reservations, that — and I think that's a very
small company — that Benjamin's concept of history is nihilistic. Which would
have to be understood as a very positive statement about it. In the same way
that in Nietzsche nihilism is the necessary stage, and is accounted for in those
terms. Understand by nihilism a certain kind of critical awareness which will not allow you to make certain affirmative statements when those affirmative statements go against the way things are. Therefore there is not in Benjamin, at this point, a statement about history as occurrence, as that which occurs, as events that occur. I think that what is implied, that what occurs, for example, is—translation is an occurrence. At the moment when translation really takes place, for example Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles, which undid Sophocles, undid Hölderlin, and revealed a great deal—that’s an occurrence. That’s an event, that is a historical event. As such, the occurrence can be textual, is generally textual, but it is an occurrence, in the sense that it is not . . . not . . . not the end of an error, but the recognition of the true nature of that error. He has described Hölderlin in his constant falling, and he says, “Aber es gibt ein Halten.” Which one tends to read as saying, “but there is a stop to this,” one can stop this if you go to the sacred text. You can read it to mean, “Aber es gibt ein Halten,” in which you hold on to this obstinately, to this notion of errance, that you stay with it, in a sense. Then something occurs in the very act of your persisting in this, in this . . . that you don’t give in to everything that would go in the other direction. At that moment, translation occurs. In Hölderlin, translation occurs. Most of the translations that are on the market are not translations in Benjamin’s sense. When Luther translated, translated the Bible, something occurred—at that moment, something happened—not in the immediate sense that from then on there were wars and then the course of history was changed—that is a by-product. What really occurred was that . . . translation. Then there are, in the history of texts, texts which are occurrences. I think Rousseau’s Social Contract is an occurrence, not because it is a political text, but something that occurs, in that sense. I realize this is difficult—a little obscure, and not well formulated. But I feel it, that there is something there. Something being said there which is kind of important to me, which I think . . . which isn’t clear.

Notes


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p. 763, note 9.
6. Cf. Illuminationen, p. 262. An English translation of the "Theologico-Political Fragment"
may be found in Reflections, Edmund Jephcott, trans., Peter Demetz, ed. (New York: Harcourt
7. Her introduction to Friedrich Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, Elizabeth M.
8. De Man's manuscript notes include a sheet on which he wrote only: "Im Anfang war das
Wort und das Wort war bei Gott / Dasselbe war bei Gott / ohne Dasselbe" (the last two words lined
out) — the beginning of Luther's translation of the Gospel according to John. Benjamin quotes the
passage in Greek.