

Translation: between what can be translated and what must be translated

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Abstract

Starting from a disconcerting interpretation of Jacques Derrida, our analysis aims at investigating and also tries to explain the blockage which appears in the English, French and Romanian translations (signed by Maurice de Gandillac, Antoine Berman, Laurent Lamy, Alexis Nouss, Harry Zohn, Steven Rendall, Martine Broda, Catrinel Pleșu etc.) of a well-known text of Walter Benjamin, *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, when translators transpose in their target languages the two quotations given by Benjamin: one of Mallarmé, left untranslated in the source text, and another, signed by Pannwitz. The fact is that both quotations have something in common: a discursive form which results from an unusual syntax, as if they were already, in a certain sense, „translations”. As if the translators feared—a feature of the translator’s psychology?—not to render their text sufficiently accessible, even when the source text is not intended to be accessible. Hence the painful dilemma of the intentional fallacy (not only of the text to be translated).

1. Text intentionality: an equally thorny issue...

As it was designed starting with the 70s, translation studies and translation practice itself had a lot to gain in terms of managing the translatable – untranslatable binomial (which comparatism or linguistics-inspired models failed to manage), mostly by making the modalities of perceiving connections between the target- and the source-text more flexible. In other words, by making the representations of the fidelity/infidelity relation more flexible.

A first step was made in the 70s, when Roland Barthes proclaimed, on behalf of structuralist literary theory, the “death of the author”: thus, the very pertinence of the older notion of “intentionality” was questioned. In other words, he questioned the operational character of the text/author relation from a theoretical perspective, but also the author’s “responsibility” for the sense and signification of the text¹. What the American New Criticism coined as *intentional fallacy*—intentional utopia—was bound to prejudice literary theory, because the latter essentially reflected the conflict between literary *explanation* (analysis of author’s *intentions*, of what he meant to say in his own text) and literary *interpretation* (description of text meanings regardless of author’s intentions). Therefore, the exclusion of the author should have contributed to the autonomy of literary research in relation to history and psychology. Furthermore, due to the postulates of literarity and autotelism inspired by Russian formalism and by Roman Jakobson, it should have had “internal”, “immanent” bases, while literarity should have resulted as an autonomous element, from the very particularities of organizing the material comprising the work. Deprived of “origin”, the text exploded under the pressure of a polysemy viewed as constitutive principle, thus eventually revealing its own intertextual nature. Only a new authority—about to be designed as a theoretical concept—would have enabled it to gain coherence, thus reconstituting its unity scattered in a “mosaic of quotations”: the reader.

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¹I also discussed this topic in Jeanrenaud (2006, p. 237–251), and then in Jeanrenaud (2012, p. 33–49).

The hermeneutics and aesthetics of reception would brilliantly confirm that text signification prevails over the author's intentionality because it accumulates—through its diachronic existence—new layers of meaning impossible to anticipate by the author and even less by its first readers. Hence, the sense of a text coagulates by the way it is “interrogated” by a historically conditioned subject, he himself also concerned (in his own context) with deciphering the “question” to which the text aimed to answer. The text no longer comprises only a *sense*—unchanging and interpretable as such from one reception to another—, but also a *signification*, due to which it articulates around a situation, thus being contextualized by the coordinates of each new reception. Whereas *sense* facilitates reception stability, *signification* explains the variations of text reception: sense is singular, while signification is open, plural, inexhaustible, and ultimately infinite. However, whereas the adequacy and depth of an interpretation depended on its capacity of revealing the *coherence* and *complexity* of a text, the coherence criterion itself—that had seemed able to eliminate the author's authority—could not be constructed without using what Antoine Compagnon had named the “presumption of intentionality” (Compagnon, 1998, p. 13–101), or at least the probability of an intention. Without such a premise, the coherence criterion was deprived of any conceptual pertinence.

It is no coincidence that translation practice also acquired an increasingly intense theoretical reflection in a period that had seemed ready to embrace the hegemonic and scientific claims of linguistics, by ascribing them the powers of an exhaustive knowledge method, recently dethroned by those who drew attention on the dangers of the linguistic “spell” (Pavel, 1988). After a period when the expectations of linguistics—looking for an experimental sample meant to illustrate its postulates—seemed to come true, the limits of an exclusively linguistic translation model became apparent. The Saussurean perspective itself—that viewed languages as closed systems, within which the sign acquired a signification (value) that coagulated exclusively due to its relations with the other language signs—theoretically confirmed the aporia of untranslatability. At the same time, however, it deepened the gap between translation practice and its theoretical impossibility: linguistic differences between languages could only reinforce the hypothesis of untranslatability, legitimated by Roman Jakobson by launching the formula according to which languages differ not in what they *may* convey, but in what they *must* convey².

Looking beyond the strictly linguistic perspective, (which would have been cautious in terms of accepting the possibility of translating the same term using a series of equivalences whose selection should depend on conformity to its context) reflection on translation shifted more and more toward a “communicational” perspective, which assimilated verbal significations to *variables* subjected to the influence of external factors. Taking into account that a text is not constructed only based on the action of linguistic mechanisms, it also includes an entire palette of extralinguistic elements, due to which linguistic competence is associated with textual competence. Thus, the notion of *meaning hypothesis* underscores the idea that utterance comprehension comes not only from the knowledge of a language, but also from the knowledge of a world.

The criterion of coherence and complexity cannot be justified in the absence of *intentionality*, for it would be a consequence of chance (Compagnon, 1998, p. 97): however, precisely this capacity of *intentionality-in-coherence* seems to raise a problem in translation and it often adds—on the rebound—more fuel to the untranslatable phantasm³. It is a fact that over time, during all eras, untranslatability

²Jakobson (1959, p. 236), reprised in Jakobson (1971, p. 264) and in Venuti (2000, p. 115): “Languages differ essentially in what they must convey and not in what they may convey”. Here is the French version of the famous sentence: “Les langues diffèrent essentiellement par ce qu'elles doivent exprimer, et non par ce qu'elles peuvent exprimer” (Jakobson, 1963, p. 84).

³To a Julien Green who claimed that translating into French *the mystic moon* within a line of E. A. Poe by *la lune mystique* would only turn it into an “opera libretto without music”, Georges Mounin replied as follows: choosing *la lune mystique* is simply a platitude, further doubled by a mistranslation, because the English adjective used by Poe breathes the allusive richness of all nuances (different from its French meaning) that it comprises in English, where the word preserved the main meaning of *mystic* directly borrowed from ancient Greek: ‘secret, mysterious’. Far from untranslatable, this image was simply... sloppily translated. It should have suggested, as Mounin posited, an initiatory attitude, reason for which *la lune sacrée* or *la lune secrète* may have worked better, or even *la lune scellée*, a formula comprising the semantic spheres of both *secrète* and *sacrée* and that creates the strongest image at the same time, cf. Mounin (1994, p. 52–53).

reverberated either on the character (form) or on the meaning (content), and in the worst case on both. Ultimately, the temerarious *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* (Cassin, 2004) elaborated by a team of researchers coordinated by Barbara Cassin bears the mark of this ambiguity, while it announces from the subtitle that it is *also a dictionary of untranslatable terms...*

2. ...as the euphoria of unlimited translatability

Nonetheless, it is equally wrong to be misled in the euphoria of unlimited translatability, which seems equally risky as proclaiming untranslatability to be the inescapable end of translation. Whereas it is true that not everything can be translated, one should also admit untranslatability when it is entailed by the very intentionality of the text to translate and one should wonder, by reversing a splendid observation made by Jacques Derrida⁴, if the text “wishes” to be translated as translatable.

Hence, I would like to get a better insight into the well-known essay of Walter Benjamin called *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (Benjamin, 1972), and especially into the way in which the French, English, and Romanian translators proceeded for two quotations within this text. The essay was translated into Romanian; there are actually two versions signed by the same female translator, Catrinel Pleșu, but published by two different publishing houses, both under the tile *Sarcina traducătorului*. I will also analyse the French version called *La tâche du traducteur* (1971), signed by Maurice de Gandillac (Benjamin, 1971, 2000a), and the most recent version translated by Martine Broda (Benjamin, 1991). I will also refer to two other French versions, one of which is a partial translation by Antoine Berman done during a seminar of translation studies concerning the interpretation and commentary of Benjamin’s text, held in the winter of 1984–1985⁵. Finally, I will also evoke two English versions entitled *The Task of the Translator* (Benjamin, 1968), signed by Harry Zohn, and *The Translator’s Task* (Benjamin, 1997), signed by Steven Rendall.

Though not listed in the dictionary of untranslatable terms edited by Barbara Cassin, the German word *Aufgabe* seems to benefit from a broader semantic sphere than its Romanian, French, and English equivalents, considering that Jacques Derrida associates its meaning not only to a task, but also to a mission, a duty (in the two meanings of the Romanian words *sarcină*, *datorie*, but also *misiune*). This word also denotes a commitment by virtue of which the translator contracts a duty: his *task* is to liberate himself from it through a donation (Derrida, 1998, p. 211). Inspired by Derrida’s comment (who also noted that the German verb *aufgeben* refers not only to a *donation*, but also to *abandonment* (Derrida, 1998, p. 212), and taking advantage from the resources of the word family of *don*, a more recent retranslation of Benjamin’s text, made by Alexis Nouss and Laurent Lamy, dares to propose the title *L’abandon du traducteur* (Lamy & Nouss, 1997). This translation also actualizes throughout the entire text the polysemy of *Aufgabe*, by putting the stake on the *tâche* – *abandon* (*task* – *abandonment*, *renouncement*) couple and by lexicalizing the to-and-fro between translatable and untranslatable, between task and its failure, disguised in the semantic core of *Aufgabe*, but possible to decipher in the very intentionality of the source-text, in its coherence, which functions on both semantic trajectories.

My analysis will focus on two quotations present in Benjamin’s text, namely on their transposition into Romanian, English, and French (for the second quotation). Toward the end of his essay, Walter Benjamin cites a sentence from Mallarmé in French without translating it, after invoking at the beginning of the paragraph, in Latin, *ingenium* (see Appendix A). The Latin term is translated by Harry Zohn into English (*philosophical genius*) and by Gandillac and Martine Broda by *génie*: this reluctance of preserving the Latin term illustrates the distance separating us from the times when Latin was the key language of science and philosophy. On the other hand, the option of the two French translators opens wide the gates of

⁴While wondering how to translate a text written in several languages, Jacques Derrida noted that “One should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised and into which a discourse on translation is translated”, (Derrida, 1998, p. 192).

⁵The seminar was held at “Collège international de philosophie”, while the text was reproduced, after the passing of Antoine Berman, using his notes and a series of recordings, cf. Berman (2008).

what is called ethnocentric, naturalizing translation, because it pushes the reader toward a Franco–French concept, that “ideological arrangement”⁶ still deeply rooted in French mentalities, thus subtly getting the reader further away from the meaning to remember: the one of an innate feature of philosophical spirit.

In exchange, the Romanian version suggests—by reversing the possession relations—that *ingenium* belongs to philosophy (“*ingenium* al filosofiei”): it is one thing to say that **philosophisches Ingenium**, that a part of our spirit is philosophical, and a very different thing to state that philosophy possesses one...

Returning to the quotation from Mallarmé, many observations can be woven starting from the fragment that Benjamin chose not to translate:

Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.

Walter Benjamin fails to indicate the exact source of the quotation. Alexis Nouss provides it in the notes accompanying his translation: the excerpt is taken from “Crise de vers”, part of the volume *Igitur. Divagations. Un coup de dés* (Lamy & Nouss, 1997, p. 23; the quotation is taken from Mallarmé, 1976, p. 244). Antoine Berman, who had found it before Nouss, declared during the seminar that he was astonished of the “altered, censored” (Berman, 2008, p. 157, and on the next page he reiterates the accusation: “Benjamin censored it”) character of the quotation! The accusation was definitely excessive, but the fact remains that Benjamin “cuts” the quotation where Mallarmé, the poet, associates—not surprisingly—“pure language” with poetical language, with verse⁷, the only one endowed with compensating virtues, which “makes up for what languages lack” (“rémunère le défaut des langues”, Berman, 2008, p. 158): but that was not Benjamin’s pure language.

Benjamin’s decision not to translate the sentence did not go unnoticed: it stirred wonder, curiosity, various interpretations, and a fiery desire to understand expressed by all those who studied Benjamin’s text. Jacques Derrida, Antoine Berman, Alexis Nouss—they all deciphered it in a way or another as a brilliant illustration of the untranslatable, which they each explained from their own perspective...

In principle, the decision not to translate the French quotation loses its entire symbolic value in one language: French. Nonetheless, the Romanian version also makes Benjamin’s quotation obsolete, by translating Mallarmé’s quotation in the first edition, published in 2000. In the second version published after two years—which did not actually revise anything—the original quotation was provided, but with a Romanian translation in the only footnote (p. 45) of this version. Furthermore, because it does not mention whether the note belongs to the translator (editor?), it suggests implicitly that it reflects a similar gesture to that of the original author! Regardless, through this decision, the translator alters the deepest layers of meaning in Benjamin’s text; moreover, she manages to make all paratexts attempting to decipher its symbolism—from Jacques Derrida to Antoine Berman, including Alexis Nouss and Laurent Lamy—utterly incomprehensible! All the more as Benjamin’s text is a preface, actually the preface to his own translation of *Tableaux parisiens* by Baudelaire. By choosing not to translate Mallarmé’s fragment, thus proclaiming its untranslatability (which, in Derrida’s words, “he has left shining in his text like the medalion of a proper name”⁸—the proper name is untranslatable!), Benjamin implicitly posits that its meaning cannot be transposed into another tongue without “damage” (Derrida, 1998, p. 213). He goes on by saying that it is impossible to translate it and that “in Mallarmé’s text, the effect of being proper and thus

⁶Starting from the 16th century and culminating with the discourse on the universality of Rivarol’s French language (1782), the thesis of French language genius consolidated over time and it turned into a persistent cliché, based on two support points: clarity and the principle of “natural” order, leading toward the postulate of its universality. Cf. Meschonnic (1997, p. 227–240).

⁷A few lines below the quotation used by Benjamin, Mallarmé states: “Seulement, sachons n’existerait pas le vers: lui, philosophiquement rémunère le défaut des langues, complément supérieur”, *apud* Berman (2008, p. 158), who takes it from Mallarmé (1965, p. 363–364).

⁸Derrida (2007, p. 202). The original text reads “briller comme la médaille d’un nom propre” (cf. Derrida, 1998, p. 213).

untranslatable is tied less to any name or to any truth of adequation than to the unique occurrence of a performative force”⁹. Through this gesture, Benjamin destabilizes the concept of translation itself and he confirms to some extent the interpretation provided by the translation of Nouss/Lamy, who decoded *Aufgabe* more like an *abandonment* than a *task* (or maybe even both).

A question remains: even Antoine Berman wondered why Benjamin did not translate Mallarmé’s fragment, all the more as—he said—it is not linguistically or stylistically untranslatable, though it develops a syntactical structure that is “if not absent, at least strangely rarefied”¹⁰. According to him, the real reason for not translating it must be sought elsewhere, in its very sense, which any translation or any decision regarding translation would have contracted it “in an ironic register”, because the sentence “concerns the imperfection of tongues, that is their multiplicity, thus what justifies both the necessity and the impossibility of translation”¹¹. The Romanian translator’s decision destroys the very coherence of Benjamin’s essay, because translating this sentence (designed as a deviation from the norm) is the same as translating something that has already been translated to a certain extent. Actually, Derrida among others understood it very well: one does not translate a translation and anyway not a text that posits the impossibility of translation. Maybe Benjamin chose not to translate it also because he already perceived it as a translation (Derrida, 1998, p. 218)...

As the other translators, Steven Rendall wonders why Benjamin provided a quotation from a great French poet without translating it and by inserting it within a preface preceding his own translation of another great French poet. Among other possible explanations, Rendall suggests that there was no reason for translating it, because it already involved a decontextualisation similar to the translation process (Rendall, 1997, p. 179). Hence, translating the quotation would have contradicted Benjamin’s intention and project, and no translator of the English versions I consulted surrounded to this “urge”. I did happen to find, though, a word-for-word English translation of the quotation, which transposes perfectly the altered syntax, but it is part of a philosophical work by Samuel Weber¹² called *Benjamin’s – abilities*:

Languages, imperfect insofar as many, lacking the highest: thinking being writing without accessories, neither whispering but silent still the immortal word, the diversity, on earth, of idioms prevents no one from offering the words which, if not, would find themselves, in a single stroke, itself materially the truth (Weber, 2008, p. 75–76).

I could have at least ascribed a good intention to the Romanian version, like the “pedagogical” decision of helping the Romanian receptors, had the translator opted for a literal transposition of Mallarmé’s fragment¹³. However, far from literal, it is full of intentionality that contradicts blatantly not only what the quotation *wants* to say, but also the *intention* of the source-text, which concerns the translator’s task. What it does not contradict it trivializes; it cancels the laconism of the original text, it rationalizes syntax by introducing verbs where the source-text eludes them, and it practices coordination: “imperfecțiunea limbilor *constă* în pluralitatea lor și în lipsa celei supreme”, which is redundant. Finally, it diminishes considerably its negative register: *manque* (turned into the noun *lipsa*); *sans accessoires*, *ni chuchotement* (*fără accesorii și fără șoapte*—a coordination that makes the rhythm monotonous, thus eliminating the dramatic note); *empêche personne* (*împiedică pe toți*); *sinon* (*altfel*). Therefore, the text is entirely reorganized following a linear, classic view of syntax and word sequence. Furthermore, the phrase *tacite encore l’immortelle*

⁹Derrida (2007, p. 202). The original text reads “Et dans le texte de Mallarmé, l’effet de propriété intraduisible se lie moins à du nom ou à la vérité d’adéquation qu’à l’unique événement d’une force performative” (Derrida, 1998).

¹⁰[...] *sinon* absente, du moins étrangement raréfiée”, *apud* Berman (2008, p. 158).

¹¹[...] a trait à l’imperfection des langues, c’est-à-dire à leur multiplicité, et donc à ce qui fonde à la fois la nécessité et l’impossibilité de la traduction” (Berman, 2008, p. 158).

¹²The author contributed decisively to the reception of Theodor W. Adorno and of the Frankfurt School, as well as of Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan in the Anglo-Saxon world.

¹³They fail to mention whether it was done by the same translator or taken from a previous translation of the Mallarmean text.

parole is mistranslated by *cuvîntul nemuritor ramîne încă subînțeleș*, thus intercalating a verb again. As for the phrase *diversité, sur terre, des idiomes qui empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité*, it is transposed into Romanian by *diversitatea idiomurilor pe pământ împiedică pe toți să profereze cuvinte care, altfel, la o atingere unică, s-ar materializa ca adevăr*, which is meaningless. Actually, the French text states that the diversity of idioms does not prevent anybody from offering the words which, such diversity should not exist and only a supreme tongue should exist, would materially be Truth itself. Whereas Mallarmé's text is untranslatable, says Samuel Weber, it does not mean it cannot be transcoded, but by seeking to render its meaning faithfully one misses the essential: namely *the way* in which the meaning of the text is meant. It comprises a threefold deviation from grammar rules: the sequence of words is reversed, so is the syntax (seemingly, the subject does not accord with the form of the verb), *la suprême* is the real subject, *les langues imparfaites*, the object...

The Romanian version fails to highlight any of the aforementioned aspects and it seems to have been caused by some kind of “recklessness”. Its only merit is that it demands a new version, which will be able to pinpoint the untranslatable where it is—so to speak—“premeditated”, within the project, not within the object...

3. Re-cognizing the poetics of the text to translate

Within the so-called functionalist theories of translation and within the debate on translation critique and evaluation, there has been increased focus on the type of text to translate, on the intentionality it expresses. Intentionality has been considered the premise of translation techniques adequacy, within an equation that completely lacks the threat of untranslatable, managed as a variable that can be isolated and eliminated in the translation process. These typologies focusing on the criterion of text function are implicitly dominated by the belief that all translational processes involve inevitable losses: the underlying ideology of translation techniques seems to be obsessed with “managing” the (theoretical) impossibility of translation. Thus, it determines the elaboration of strategies aiming to limit losses, considered secondary (hence, acceptable), provided that the translation act focuses on producing an equivalent target-text, able to recompose the predominant function of the source-text. Hence, the shifting of translation toward *the dominant function* of the text to translate becomes the basic translational principle: translation adequacy is no longer justified in relation to the source-text, but with its *skopos*, which dictates to a translator the strategies to follow¹⁴. The faithfulness–translation binomial, just like the question of untranslatable, are thus de-dramatized through an operation of shifting: faithfulness no longer associates directly (through an inevitable relationship of filiation) the target-text to the source-text, while “treason” is justified by translation techniques that no longer require direct conformity. In exchange, the receptor's position is consolidated insofar as the function of a text is *also* determined considering its effect on it¹⁵.

The act of translating a philosophical text seems to want to mask a contradiction that conceals some kind of “desecration” of the philosophical intentionality of the text per se, namely to convey universal contents. He himself a translator of Jürgen Habermas and Theodor W. Adorno, Jean-René Ladmiral considers the translation of philosophy a “scandal”, an almost indecent gesture which alters Reason, considering that the very possibility of translation involves operations that dissociate “the conceptual *signifiés* of philosophy (of a philosophy?) from the *signifiants* of the language of departure or source language [...] to facilitate their subsequent ‘reincarnation’ into other foreign *signifies* of the language of arrival or target language” (Ladmiral, 1998, p. 990; cf. also Ladmiral, 1989, p. 6). Such scandal would even be twofold: on one hand, the discourse that aims to explain a universal Reason cannot avoid the “historical and cultural particularity of national traditions”; on the other, it is forced to be embodied in “linguistic accidents—justly called idiomatic—of natural languages” (Ladmiral, 1998, p. 990). Hence, the translation of this type of text highlights – on the level of scandal and derision – the inner tension of the universalizing

¹⁴Cf. *Skopostheorie* elaborated by Reiss & Vermeer (1984).

¹⁵I also developed the theme of philosophical translation in Jeanrenaud (2006, p. 251–285).

project of philosophical rationality, forced to accept being transposed into the signifiers of a particular language. The special profile of this “scandal” delimits the specificity of philosophical texts and confirms the tension caused by uncertainties surrounding the very possibility of translating them. Such tension is all the more significant as, in this type of text, “the rational transparency of conceptual *signifiés* as purpose of the philosophical discourse [...] will be shadowed by the contingent ‘impurities’ of the linguistic *signifiant*” (Ladmiral, 1998, p. 983). Therefore, philosophical text can be defined as a signified-oriented text, which is underscored by the valorisation of the language’s capacity of becoming a meta-language. In other words, the philosophical discourse referent is its own signified – hence the “scandal” of translating this category of texts (Ladmiral, 1998, p. 988). Philosophical texts can be included in the category of literary texts in the broad sense; however, through the “technicity of the philosophical ‘jargon’” (Ladmiral, 1998, p. 988) they use, they are also included in the category of technical texts, but from which they are distinguished because the subject speaking is omnipresent in the text.

Aiming to short-circuit the untranslatable, many consider philosophical texts a stratified structure, which would involve different translation techniques: the discourse of such a text appears, on one hand, as an architectonics made of a level comprising specialized language and, on the other, as a narrative structure, as a story related to the literary type of text. Hence, the translation of philosophical texts would represent a very special case of combination between literal translation techniques—for transposing terminologies—and so-called “free”, “idiomatic” translations, for the translation of the textual device. Hence, the translator would have the task of dividing the language used in the text, namely the aspects related to the common lexicon of the source-language to the author’s word (that system of indicators making up the mark of a particular subjectivity) (Ladmiral, 1994, p. 223). However, such a view of philosophical text translation entails a set of risks, which are far from insignificant: its underlying ideology privileges meaning to the detriment of text poetics, of the modality of its constructs, thus generating a series of target-text distortions, of explanatory deformations, annotations, peri- and paraphrases, which may destroy the original configuration.

Hence the imperative of translating not only text rhetoric, but also, in the words of Henri Meschonnic, text poetics (he says translators are prone to taking one for the other): “The task of Humboldt’s translator is to recognize this poetics. To recognize it like poetics. Not like rhetoric. Thought labour gives birth to a poetics if it transforms language values into discourse values, specific only to its discourse. And if language categories remain language categories, rhetoric games emerge. This banality – that one cannot separate a thought from its writing. The translator has the task of not taking poetics for rhetoric, at all levels distinguished by traditional linguistics” (cf. Meschonnic, 1999, p. 350). Upon examining the French translations of the texts written by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Meschonnic concludes that the differential translation of philosophical text seen as the sealed superimposition of two layers (on one hand terminology, on the other its formal textualization) entails serious dangers. Whereas terminology was translated by observing correspondences, “operators, logical rhythm [...] are treated like an element where variation is not important. The text is respected in its rigour, but such rigour has only a substantial, conceptual nature. Hence, a certain idea on philosophical text emerges: besides technicity—that involves the confusion between concept and word—all the rest is literature. Meaning rhetoric. Such a view of language is related only to the sign. To the primacy of the signified identified with the sign” (Meschonnic, 1999, p. 382).

This method conceals a double (two-faced?) ideology on the act of translation. Henri Meschonnic seems to suggest it by positing that, in the end, the translation of specialized lexicon through correspondences expresses the confusion between concept and word, insofar as the guarantee of translation success is anchored in the belief that rendering the sense depends on the possibility of maintaining them in all occurrences of the source-text. Jean-René Ladmiral—whose well-known translational “theorems” (Ladmiral, 1994) militate for the right of practicing “annexionism” in translation—sees this procedure as

the extension of “substantialist metaphysics”¹⁶ on language, which tends to sacralize the source-language, to over-evaluate its expressive valences, which increases the danger of falling into the trap of translatable–untranslatable aporia. Hence, dramatizing the gap between what is and what is not translatable will undermine to a greater extent the endeavour of philosophical text translation that, through its very nature, expresses within a tensed register “the coincidence between individual singularity and universality”¹⁷.

4. How does one translate a “translation”?

The second quotation provided by Walter Benjamin is a fragment from *Die Krisis der europäischen Kultur* by Rudolf Pannwitz (Pannwitz, 1917). Again, the syntax is altered; furthermore, punctuation marks are absent and there are no capital letters for common nouns or first words of sentences. This was the style adopted by Jakob Grimm or Stefan George (Berman, 2008, p. 159). The quotation comprises two sentences that end in a full stop, but none of the sentences begins with a capital letter. The two quotations, which share the same type of formal structure, have quite many points in common: by ignoring syntax, both of them rely on words, which are ripped out of the web of syntactical structure. They are displayed as names whose primary relation is not to other words in the language but to things¹⁸. However, for Benjamin, too, translation is a word-related operation. One must look for the reason why the author chose these two quotations: “[...] Pannwitz’s German, like Mallarmé’s French, subverts the linguistic structure of the language, and particularly its syntax—and might thus be seen as having already achieved the kind of liberation of the word that translation is supposed to provide” (Rendall, 1997, p. 180).

Restoring—through translation—the syntactical order of the two quotations (one if which is not to be translated) destroys not only their objective, but also their *raison d’être* in Benjamin’s text. As I have mentioned before, in a certain way, the two quotations are already (intralinguistic) translations, because they disrupt syntax and liberate the word by translational principles similar to those predicted by Benjamin. That is why they are untranslatable, and Benjamin states it clearly: “Übersetzungen dagegen erweisen sich unübersetzbar nicht wegen der Schwere, sondern wegen der allzu großen Flüchtigkeit, mit welcher der Sinn an ihnen haftet”¹⁹ or “Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen”²⁰.

¹⁶Jean-René Ladmiral, *Traduire: théorèmes pour la traduction*, Éditions Payot, Paris, 1979, *apud* Brownlie (2002, p. 306).

¹⁷*Ibid.* Cf. Jean-René Ladmiral, *La traduction philosophique*, in „Revue de Phonétique Appliquée”, *apud* Brownlie (2002).

¹⁸Cf. Rendall (1997, p. 179). Rendall wonders why Benjamin chose this quotation from Pannwitz, though it would have made more sense to invoke Schleiermacher or Humboldt.

¹⁹Benjamin (1972, p. 20). Cf. Lamy & Nouss (1997, p. 27) version: “Les traductions, par contre, se révèlent intraduisibles, non pas à cause du poids que le sens fait peser sur elles, mais parce qu’il s’attache à elles de façon beaucoup trop fugitive”; the version of Catrinel Pleșu: “Traducerile, pe de altă parte, se dovedesc a fi intraductibile nu din cauză că sensul le împovărează prea mult, ci din cauză că le afectează mult prea în treacăt” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 47). Compared to the *fugitif* character of the way in which sense is associated to translation in the Nouss/Lamy version, the Romanian formula stating that sense “affect” translations in “*mult prea în treacăt*” [far too insignificantly] seems inadequate and it diminishes the complexity of the idea expressed by the source-text.

Zohn’s version: “Translations, in contrast, prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty but because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 80). Rendall’s version: “Translations, on the contrary, prove to be untranslatable not because meaning weighs on them heavily, but rather because it attaches to them all too fleetingly” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 164).

²⁰Benjamin (1972, p. 9). Nouss/Lamy version: “La traduction est une forme. Pour la saisir comme telle il faut revenir à l’original. En effet, c’est en lui que repose sa loi, telle qu’elle est contenue dans sa traductibilité” (Lamy & Nouss, 1997, p. 14). The version of Catrinel Pleșu: “Traducerea este o formă. Pentru a o înțelege ca formă, trebuie să ne întoarcem la original, căci în el este cuprinsă legea care guvernează traducerea, și anume traductibilitatea sa” (Benjamin, 2002, p. 39). Unlike Nouss/Lamy, who maintain strictly the jerky structure of this three-sentence concatenation with an argumentative crescendo, the Romanian version chooses to connect the last two sentences of the source-text, thus reducing their impact through excessive explicitation and missing their very rhythm and poetics. Rendall’s version: “Translation is a mode. In order to grasp it as such, we have to go back to the original. For in it lies translation’s law, decreed as the original’s translatability” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 152). Zohn’s version: “Translation is a mode. To comprehend it as mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability” (Benjamin, 1968, p. 69).

Of the six translations consulted, only one dares to keep the *form* of Pannwitz's text (see [Appendix B](#)). The others merely try to suggest its formal particularities to a lesser or greater extent, but they do end up introducing commas and full stops here and there. Antoine Berman rephrases the sentences, which now begin with capitals, but he does not introduce punctuation marks within them; in exchange, he translates, according to the norm, **wort bild ton** by **mot, image et son** (an *et* precedes the last term of the enumeration). Nouss and Lamy massively alter the sentence structure, by multiplying full stops and by introducing two semicolons; in exchange, they eliminate the ellipsis of the source-text. Finally, Gandillac's translation preserves both the punctuation and the sentence structure of the source-text. The versions of Zohn and Catrinel Pleșu follow the norms to the letter and they alter all deviations of the source-text (orthographic, syntactic, sentence structure, capitals at the beginning of sentences). Only Rendall dares to transpose integrally Pannwitz's text, namely its form, but he chooses—rather surprisingly—to suppress the first term of the **wort bild ton** sequence. However, Rendall too fails to find a solution of “transposing” the lower case letters for common nouns used in the source-text. Nobody seems to have thought to the (plausible, though) possibility of keeping the bizarre character of the German nouns written with lower case letters by translating into English, French, Romanian, those nouns using capital letters. Naturally, one may object that making such a decision for languages where common nouns begin with small case letters would ascribe them a symbolic or allegoric value, by personifying them. However, should such a technique be applied to all nouns and to the beginning of sentences, the reader may realize that the purpose is not to provide a symbolical connotation to nouns, but that something else is at stake. Of course, writing common nouns in German using small case letters is a decision immediately perceived as disrupting orthography, while writing them with capital letters in French, English, or Romanian could never be perceived as a deviation from the norm.

Some translators feel the need to justify themselves, which means that the decision of normalizing translation makes them uncomfortable: [Berman \(2008, p. 179\)](#) partially retranslates Gandillac's version, by trying to keep the oral character of the source-text. He humbly states that it should not be “combed”, “but left partially dishevelled” (p. 178). Nouss and Lamy, who dared to translate the title by “L'abandon du traducteur”, seem timorous all of a sudden and they admit in a footnote (without fully justifying this decision) that they were not “fully” faithful to the source-text, “since we restore a punctuation whose omission would lead, in our opinion, to confusion”.

However, the form—reproducing the oral register—chosen by Pannwitz is related to what he is trying to convey, and Zohn or Catrinel Pleșu failed to pinpoint and thus to translate it: by both form and content, Pannwitz's text refers to the oral essence of language, where “word, image, and sound meet” ([Berman, 2008, p. 179](#)). The mention of the word “dialect” should have definitely drawn their attention. According to Antoine Berman, the quotation is an authentic “historical story” (p. 178) on translation, with a twofold perspective: on one hand, through the “collision”, the commotion of languages for which it testifies—without trying to institute it; on the other, through the “movement toward the ‘ultimate elements’ of language itself, where word, image, and sound meet – as from dialect to dialect” ([Berman, 2008, p. 179](#))²¹.

²¹Berman does not miss the chance of mocking Meschonnic, saying that he is surprised the latter quoted the text “by ascribing it to Benjamin” and he condescendingly asserts “of course, whoever reads Pannwitz?”. To twist the knife even deeper, he adds: “Here are some more historical statements on translation”. However, Berman fails to pinpoint where exactly Meschonnic made such confusion. Upon reading the mean observation, I first thought it was a “revealing lapsus” and that maybe Meschonnic's mistake proved, on the other hand, to what degree Benjamin's quotation and text merged, to what extent one supported the other, and that all translators had the duty of preserving this fusion... I still had a little doubt, though, and I studied Meschonnic's works until I finally found what I was looking for. In *Pour la poétique*, Meschonnic says: “To paraphrase a fragment quoted by Benjamin, I would say that, instead of frenchizing Sanskrit, Greek, English, we should sanskritize, hellenize, and anglicize French”. Seven lines below, talking about the “dialectics of translation process contradictions”, he posits that it “leads to such formulation by Benjamin” and he quotes the second part of Pannwitz's quotation: as in the case of the quote from Mallarmé, Berman was only half right and maybe it would have been more important for him to notice that Meschonnic did not ascribe to Benjamin a segment of Pannwitz's text, but that he omitted to specify that he was actually quoting what Gandillac—the translator—said that Benjamin said... Cf. [Meschonnic \(1973, p. 143\)](#).

Pannwitz's text refers precisely to the "oral" essence of language, and *dialect* is not invoked incidentally: "For all tongues are the Tongue insofar as they are dialects. There is no language–tongues (from gender to species), but tongue–dialects. The space where translation unfolds as an intention to be a letter of the tongue is the dialect. French and Chinese are dialects of the same tongue" (Berman, 2008, p. 179).

According to this reading, *work*—which replaces *word* in the English and the Romanian version—leads to a terrible mistranslation: assimilating the word to written word when the issue concerns *dialects*, transposing it by metonymy as *work* abolishes and completely annuls the value and sense of the *word–image–sound* triad. The Romanian version and the English one (not to mention the one that simply eliminates *wort*) not only make both the quotation **and** the text by Benjamin unintelligible, but they also completely alter the meaning. The sequence *work, image, and tone* // *opera, imaginea și tonul*²² deviate the reading by making it scriptural, writing-oriented, thus alienating it from the dialect essence itself, namely from the orality pointed out by Pannwitz.

Finally, *word, image, tone* are not **convergent**, like in the versions of Pleșu and Zohn: their hypothesis of meaning deviates massively because of the metonymical and inevitably *rhetorizing* assimilation of *word* by *work*, and it institutes another coherence²³, which makes dialectal orality obsolete. A translator should wish to get to their *confluence*, where word, image, tonality meet, not where they *converge* and all the less where *they are convergent*. This is the only way to penetrate the depths of one's own language, to unfold it, not *by means of*, but *due to* the foreign language.

Hence, the connections established between Pannwitz's quotation and Benjamin's essay are to remain forever invisible for the readers of the Zohn, Rendall, and Pleșu versions. By highlighting the dialectal, the quotation open the way toward the orality of that *Reine Sprache* [pure language], identified with the dialect or, more precisely, with the "dialectal essence of language" (Berman, 2008, p. 181): "From poetry to theatre, children books, novels, psychoanalysis or religious, juridical texts... the translation of works is related to orality", Berman warns (p. 180). Furthermore, he insists that writing includes orality: "Writing is best listened to when orality is embedded in it. Language itself is oral language". Translation is the (only) act able to "uncover the orality of the written original" (p. 180).

At the end of this endeavour, a question remains to which I have yet to find an answer: why did translators—who understood the stake of Pannwitz's quotation, who interpreted and commented it in such a brilliant manner (Berman, Nouss, Lamy and Rendall)—not dare to translate this quotation in both its letter *and* spirit? By translating this quotation as they did, they reached the highest point of treason, because they betrayed both the letter and the meaning. By doing so, they betrayed the very coherence of the text where the quotation is inserted, which refers to the translator's task²⁴.

[Translated by Alina Piftor]

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²²Maybe *tonality*? I underscore the translators' hesitation between *ton* [tone] and *son* [sound].

²³Which is related to discourse rationalization and levelling, as well as with the deforming tendencies theorized by the same Berman, cf. Berman (1999, p. 49–68).

²⁴By confirming ironically the difficulty of attempting to delimit fidelity from infidelity, the Romanian language—also thanks to Ion Luca Caragiale—found a way to include in the semantic sphere of the same word *trădărea* and *traducerea* [treason and translation]...

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Appendix A.

Benjamin (1972)

Denn es gibt ein **philosophisches Ingenium**, dessen eigenstes die Sehnsucht nach jener Sprache ist, welche in der Übersetzung sich bekundet „Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.” Wenn, was in diesen Worten Mallarmé gedenkt, dem Philosophen streng ermeßbar ist, so steht mit ihren Keimen solcher Sprache die Übersetzung mitten zwischen Dichtung und der Lehre. Ihr Werk steht an Ausprägung diesen

nach, doch es prägt sich nicht weniger tief ein in die Geschichte.

Lamy & Nous (1997)

Car il existe un *ingenium* philosophique dont le trait le plus spécifique est la nostalgie de cette langue qui s'annonce dans les traductions. „Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.” Si ce que pense Mallarmé en ces termes est applicable en toute rigueur au philosophe, alors la traduction, grosse des germes d'une telle langue, se tient au point médian entre l'œuvre poétique et la doctrine. Son action est moins marquée mais laisse une trace tout aussi profonde dans l'histoire.

Benjamin (1968)

For there is a **philosophical genius** that is characterized by a yearning for that language which manifests itself in translations. „Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, la terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité”. If what Mallarmé evokes here is fully fathomable to a philosopher, translation, with its rudiments of such a language, is midway between poetry and doctrine. Its products are less sharply defined, but it leaves no less of a mark on history.

Benjamin (2000b)

Căci există un *ingenium* al filosofiei, care este caracterizat de nostalgia acestei limbi care se anunță în traduceri: „Imperfecțiunea limbilor constă în pluralitatea lor și în lipsa celei supreme: a gândi înseamnă a scrie fără accesorii și fără șoapte, cuvântul nemuritor rămâne încă subînțeleles, diversitatea idiomurilor de pe pământ împiedică pe toți să profereze cuvinte care, altfel, la o atingere unică, s-ar materializa ca adevăr”. Dacă ceea ce spune Mallarmé aici se poate aplica, cu toată rigoarea, filosofului, atunci traducerea, cu germenii acestei limbi pe care îi poartă în ea, este la jumătatea distanței dintre creația literară și teorie. Cu toate că operele ei sînt mai puțin rigurose reliefate, nu lasă urme mai puțin adînci în istorie.

Benjamin (2002)

Căci există un *ingenium* al filosofiei, care este caracterizat de nostalgia acestei limbi care se anunță în traduceri: „Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.”* Dacă ceea ce spune Mallarmé aici se poate aplica, cu toată rigoarea, filosofului, atunci traducerea, cu germenii acestei limbi pe care îi poartă în ea, este la jumătatea distanței dintre creația literară și teorie. Cu toate că operele ei sînt mai puțin rigurose reliefate, nu lasă urme mai puțin adînci în istorie. (***Nota de subsol:** „Imperfecțiunea limbilor constă în pluralitatea lor și în lipsa celei supreme: a gândi înseamnă a scrie fără accesorii și fără șoapte, cuvântul nemuritor ramîne încă subînțeleles, diversitatea idiomurilor pe pământ împiedică pe toți să profereze cuvinte care, altfel, la o atingere unică, s-ar materializa ca adevăr.”.)

Appendix B.

Benjamin (1972)

Dort heißt es: „unsre Übertragungen auch die besten gehen von einem falschen Grundsatz aus sie wollen das indische griechische englische verdeutschten anstatt das deutsche zu verindischen vergriechischen verenglischen. sie haben eine viel bedeutendere Ehrfurcht vor den eigenen Sprachgebräuchen als vor dem Geiste des fremden Werks ... der grundsätzliche Irrtum des Übertragenden ist dass er den zufälligen Stand der eignen Sprache festhält anstatt sie durch die fremde Sprache gewaltig bewegen zu lassen. er muss zumal wenn er aus einer sehr fernen Sprache überträgt auf die letzten Elemente der Sprache selbst wo **wort bild ton** in eins geht zurück dringen er muss seine Sprache **durch** die fremde erweitern und vertiefen man hat keinen Begriff in welchem Maße das möglich ist bis zu welchem Grade jede Sprache sich verwandeln kann Sprache von Sprache fast nur wie Mundart von Mundart sich unterscheidet dieses aber nicht wenn man sie allzu leicht sondern gerade wenn man sie schwer genug nimmt”. (cf. Pannwitz, 1917, p. 240).

Lamy & Nous (1997)

On y lit: „nos traductions, et même les meilleures, partent d'un principe erroné si elles entendent germaniser l'indien, le grec, l'anglais, au lieu d'indianiser, greciser, angliciser l'allemand. elles ont beaucoup plus de respect pour les usages

de leur propre langue que pour l'esprit de l'œuvre étrangère. L'erreur fondamentale du traducteur est de s'en tenir à l'état aléatoire de sa propre langue, au lieu d'être animé par le mouvement puissant de la langue étrangère. surtout lorsqu'il traduit d'une langue très lointaine, il lui faut remonter aux éléments ultimes de la langue même, où **mot, image et ton** ne font qu'un; il doit élargir et approfondir sa langue **grâce** à la langue étrangère. on ne dispose d'aucun concept pour évaluer dans quelle mesure cela est possible, jusqu'à quel degré chaque langue peut se transformer; de langue à langue on observe pratiquement la même distance que de dialecte à dialecte, non quand on **les** prend trop légèrement, cependant, mais bien plutôt quand on **les** considère avec suffisamment de sérieux."

Berman (2008)

„[...] nos traductions même les meilleures partent d'un faux principe elles veulent germaniser l'indien le grec l'anglais au lieu d'indianiser de greciser d'angliciser l'allemand. Elles ont bien plus de respect face aux usages propres de la langue que devant l'esprit de l'œuvre étrangère. [...] L'erreur fondamentale du traduisant est qu'il maintient l'état fortuit de sa propre langue au lieu de se laisser puissamment mouvoir par la langue étrangère (trad. Berman). Surtout lorsqu'il traduit d'une langue très éloignée, il lui faut remonter aux éléments ultimes du langage même, là où se **rejoignent mot, image, son**; il lui faut élargir et approfondir sa propre langue **grâce** à la langue étrangère; on n' imagine pas à quel point la chose est possible; jusqu'à quel degré une langue peut se transformer; de langue à langue il n'y a guère plus de distance que de dialecte à dialecte, mais cela non point quand on **le** prend trop à la légère, bien plutôt quand on **les** prend assez au sérieux". (cf. traducerea lui Maurice de Gandillac)

Benjamin (1968)

Pannwitz writes: „Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works... The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where **work, image, and tone converge**. He must expand and deepen his language **by means of** the foreign language. It is not generally realized to what extent this is possible to what extent any language can be transformed, how language differs from dialect; however, **this last** is true only if one takes **language** seriously enough, not if one takes it lightly”.

Rendall (1997)

He writes: „our translations even the best start out from a false principle they want to germanize Indic Greek English instead of indicizing, graecizing, anglicizing German. they are far more awed by their own linguistic habits than by the spirit of the foreign work [...] the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the state in which his own language happens to be rather than allowing it to be put powerfully in movement by the foreign language. he must in particular when he is translating out of a language very distant from his own penetrate back to the ultimate elements of the language at that very point where **image tone meld into one** he must broaden and deepen his own language **through** the foreign one we have no notion how far this is possible to what degree each language can transform itself one language differentiates itself from another almost as one dialect from another but this happens not when they are considered **all** too lightly but only when they are considered with sufficient gravity”.

Benjamin (2000b, 2002)

Pannwitz spune: „Chiar și cele mai bune traduceri ale noastre pornesc de la o premisă greșită. Ele vor să germanizeze hindi, greaca, engleza, în loc să hindizeze, grecezeze și anglicizeze germana. Au un respect mult mai mare față de obiceiurile limbii lor decât față de spiritul operelor străine... Eroarea fundamentală a traducătorului constă în faptul că-și menține propria limba în starea în care se află întâmplător, în loc să-i permită să fie puternic afectată limba străină. Mai ales atunci când traduce dintr-o limbă care este foarte îndepărtată de a sa, trebuie să se întoarcă la elementele ultime ale limbii înseși, acolo unde **opera, imaginea și tonul sînt convergente**. Trebuie să extindă și să aprofundeze propria limba **prin intermediul** limbii străine. În general, nu se știe în ce măsură este posibil acest lucru, în ce măsură se poate transforma o limbă; distanța de la o limbă la alta nu este mai mare decât de la un dialect la altul, de aceea, **limba** nu trebuie tratată cu ușurință, ci luată în serios.”