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Revisiting Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in Light of His *Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*

Relire « La tâche du traducteur » par Walter Benjamin d'après son *Concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*

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Article abstract

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," the most widely cited twentieth century philosophical statement on translation, is commonly seen as one of the most opaque and misunderstood essays in the field. This paper uses a close reading of Benjamin's doctoral thesis, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," to throw light on his thoughts on translation. I argue that the German Romantics' definition of art, and art's relation to criticism, are crucial to understanding why Benjamin conceived of translation as an "afterlife" of the work of art, why he believed that translatability is an innate quality of the work of art, and why he speaks of translation as moving the work of art onto a higher plane. I read Benjamin's own essay on translation as a sort of "criticism" which seeks to "translate" the philosophical ideals of the Romantics, and thus give them an afterlife, and then reflect upon the implications for translation studies today.

Revisiting Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in Light of His *Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*[1]

James St. André

Introduction

Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator" is one of the most widely cited twentieth century philosophical statements on translation, and has generated more philosophical debate than any other single piece of translation criticism. Perhaps most famous are Jacques Derrida's essay, *Des tours de Babel* (1985), Paul de Man's Messenger Lecture at Cornell University that was published in *Yale French Studies* (1985), and Steiner's earlier treatment in *After Babel* (1975), but there have been dozens of others. A partial list in English would include Carol Jacobs (1975), Marilyn Gaddis Rose (1982), Michael Jennings (1987), Andrew Benjamin (1989), Dennis Porter (1989), Rudolphe Gasché (1996), Steven Rendall and others in a special issue of the journal *TTR* (1997), Bettine Menke (2002), Samuel Weber (2005), Henry Sussman (2005) and Nicola Bradbury (2006).[2] The number of articles published in the past ten years attests to its continued importance almost a century after its publication, even

1 Pour cet article, l'auteur a reçu le Prix Vinay et Darbelnet, décerné par l'ACT (N.D.L.R.).

2 For major French sources, see Nouss, 1997.

though this strand of philosophy may currently be out of fashion in North American departments of philosophy.

Perhaps because it is also commonly cited as one of the most opaque and misunderstood essays in the field (A. Benjamin, 1989, p. 89), and has been used to support wildly different viewpoints on translation by later theorists, many critics try to contextualize the essay. Normally, such contextualization follows one of three paths: either an attempt is made to relate it to other works, published or unpublished, by Benjamin himself; parallels and comparisons are made to the work of contemporaries and friends, especially either the Jewish mystic thinker Gershom Scholem or members of the Frankfurt school; or the implications of its historical context as an introduction to a collection of poems translated from French by Benjamin are treated in detail.

For a man of such varied and voluminous output, who was also in correspondence with some of the most important thinkers of his age, there is a lot of context. Most attention has focused on Benjamin's theory of language (see de Man, 1985; A. Benjamin, 1989; Porter, 1989; Bradbury, 2006; Rendall, 1997), while some have tried to relate it to his writings on criticism (see Jennings, 1987; Gasché, 1996), and a few have sought to excavate its mystic roots (see de Man, 1985; Lamy, 1997; Benjamin, 1989). With the exception of those who explore its relation to mysticism, others have tended to see "The Task of the Translator" as a precursor to the later Walter Benjamin, Marxist critic extraordinaire and compiler of the Arcades Project. When reference is made to earlier works by Benjamin, it is only if those works relate either to his philosophy of language or to his later project.

Although many of these studies have something valuable to tell us about Benjamin's philosophy of translation, I believe that too much emphasis has been placed both on Benjamin's philosophy of language and on his later works concerning criticism. Hanssen and A. Benjamin (2002, p. 4) point out that it is only in the late 1920s, several years after "The Task of the Translator" is published, that we see evidence in Benjamin's writing of a rejection of the Romantic notion of Reflective Criticism, with its quest for perfectibility (see my discussion

below for why I believe this concept is crucial in understanding Benjamin's essay on translation). To a great extent, the later Benjamin, Marxist critic, has dominated; earlier works such as "The Task of the Translator" tend to be viewed as forerunners of the later thinker.

Without negating those insights, in this essay I would like to focus on the importance of one particular text, his doctoral thesis, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* [*The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*], written in 1919, composed just two years before he wrote "The Task of the Translator" as the introduction to translations of poetry that he had begun working on as early as 1914. It has been translated into English by David Lachterman, Howard Eiland, and Ian Balfour as *The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism*, and published as part of Harvard University's the Walter Benjamin project. While the text reveals that at this point in time Benjamin was already deeply concerned with philosophy of language, and of course with the concept of criticism, it also contains other elements which can shed light on his later "The Task of the Translator."

The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism is quite long, and I do not pretend to be able to give a comprehensive overview of the essay here. Readers are referred to Hanssen and A. Benjamin (2002), especially the introduction and first four essays by Lacoue-Labarthe, Menninghaus, Gasché, and Phelan, for a more thorough consideration of selected aspects of the text. What I will do below is give an outline of the most important points of the essay, working through it in sequence, and then point out ways in which it relates to "The Task of the Translator." Finally, I will end with a meditation on the question of the essay's continued relevance, given the importance of certain beliefs underlying the text which I think many people today would not share with Benjamin.

Benjamin's Concept of Criticism: Introduction

In the first section of his thesis, Benjamin lays out his mode of operation. First, he tells us that the work is based mainly on

one German romantic, Friedrich Schlegel, and moreover that Benjamin has drawn mainly on his early writings from the *Athenaeum*. Then Benjamin claims that the early Romantics had a systematic philosophy of criticism, even though none of them wrote it out systematically, and that he has also drawn on the work of Fichte (not a Romantic) and on selected writings of Novalis.

Based on these points, it is perhaps not farfetched for us to see that what we are reading is Benjamin's concept of criticism, not the Romantics'; or at least, that it is Benjamin's understanding of the Romantics rather than a historical reconstruction of their thought. Gasché in fact argues persuasively that Benjamin did not accept blindly everything that he found in Romantic philosophy, noting several points where Benjamin either disagrees with or maintains a critical distance from their writings (1996, pp. 54-58), while Hanssen and A. Benjamin say that his thesis is "an unconventional interpretation of Early Romanticism [that] chemically extracted a Romantic philosophy of art from Schlegel and Novalis's notebooks, lectures, poetry, critical and philosophical fragments" (2002, p. 2). Given what I see as Benjamin's conception of the relation between the original work of art and the critic, we should be aware that Benjamin as critic is quite possibly in a similar relation to his Romantic precursors as they as critics felt themselves to be in relation to works of art.

The Romantic Theory of Knowledge: Reflection, Criticism, and Objects

In order to understand the Romantic notion of criticism, Benjamin begins by explaining their concept of reflection. As with certain post-structuralist critics, who are fascinated with theories which, like the worm Ouroboros, eats its own tail, the Romantics were interested in reflection because of its infinite regressive capacity: "I am thinking about thinking about thinking about thinking about […]." For the Romantics, reflection is thus posited as being necessary for all thought, not the other way around, as one might suppose; here Benjamin contrasts the Romantics basing

all thought on reflection with Fichte, for whom the self was the basis of all thought.[3]

For the Romantics, if reflection is the basis of all thought, then it must necessarily follow that reflection is also the basis of all art. However, if reflection is the most basic thought process and leads to the creation of art, another thought process, criticism, is accorded the highest status in the Romantic view, following Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.[4] They thus embraced the critical act and elevated it to an equal status with the creation of the work of art. This elevation of the status of criticism is, for Benjamin, one of the major achievements of the Romantics.

For the Romantics, Criticism emerges in distinction to connoisseurship of art, and certain postulates necessarily follow. First of all, dogmatism (i.e., absolute principles of taste used to appreciate and evaluate the art object by connoisseurs) is rejected in favour of a radical skepticism. Second, they acknowledge that their own system of criticism could never be complete or infallible. Here they foreshadow the work in mathematics by Gödel at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hofstadter, 1979) and, again of course, post-structuralism.

Having established the relationship between reflection and criticism as two separate modes of thought, one following on the other (because criticism cannot occur if reflection has not first happened), Benjamin then goes on to discuss the Romantic's theory of objects. For a modern audience, this is perhaps the most difficult section to understand and accept, yet I believe it is crucial to an understanding of "The Task of the Translator." It is also precisely the area that has received the least attention in the literature mentioned in my introduction. Drawing on both Schlegel and Novalis, Benjamin says that, for the Romantics, all

3 Again, see Menninghaus (2002) for a detailed discussion of how Benjamin seems to deliberately re-interpret both Fichte and the Romantic concept of Reflection in places in order to construct his theory of criticism.

4 See Lacoue-Labarthe (2002, pp. 14-18) on the importance of Kant for Benjamin's project.

objects in the universe are capable of reflection; tables think "I am a table," chairs think "I am a chair," and so forth. Thus the entire universe is sentient, although on a much lower level than humanity. Our knowledge of objects then depends upon extending our self-knowledge to include the object's self-knowledge. So strictly speaking, we do not know objects, we merge with them, make them part of ourselves, and thus come to know ourselves better.[5]

Criticism of Art

What does all this mean for the criticism of art? Benjamin gives us two definitions. First, he says that art is a determination of the medium of reflection. Second, criticism of art is knowledge of the object in this medium of reflection. So, for example, a sculpture is a determination in a physical medium of something, say a personage, like Hercules, or an abstract concept, such as Hope. Criticism is then the understanding of Hercules or Hope in the medium of the stone.

Since criticism depends upon understanding the object of art, and objects can only be understood by our expanding our consciousness to include them, criticism must be a type of self-reflection only possible *after* knowledge of the object is acquired. Unlike the knowledge of ordinary objects, which involves only self-knowledge, however, criticism involves self-judgment. "Judgment," because it is criticism, and "self" because the art object has become part of the critic's own being.

If criticism is thus a form of self-criticism, it is also therefore intensification and heightening of self-awareness. The critic becomes a better person for having reflected critically on the work of art. Thus, criticism is a positive, not a negative type of knowledge (unlike the commonly understood use of the term criticism in modern English). Moreover, it is not only the critic who is changed for the better by the process of criticism. Since the critic has made the work of art part of himself,[6] any change

5 There are some interesting potential links to the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

6 I use the masculine pronoun advisedly, as here I am discussing the Romantic point of view.

in the critic is also a change in the object of art. Thus Benjamin notes that criticism complements, rejuvenates, and moves the work of art onto a higher plane; the work of art is not a static object, unchanged after the critic is done with it. At this juncture Benjamin explicitly mentions translation as another type of rejuvenating transformation of art; and of course this is one of the major themes of the later essay "The Task of the Translator."

Benjamin also pauses to note that, although theoretically speaking the process of criticism could go on forever because it is a type of self-reflection, two key concepts of Romanticism are *form* and *self-limitation*. Therefore, even though criticism can never reach perfection, knowing when and where to stop is the highest good. Here is one obvious difference between Benjamin's understanding of the Romantic notion of criticism and Derrida's later concept of an infinite chain of deferred meaning. Looking forward to my discussion of the relation between Benjamin's philosophy of translation and religion, we might see the influence of theological arguments, whereby anything taken to excess is equated with a tendency to evil.

Four basic tenets of Romantic criticism follow from the above. First, the act of criticism does not involve any explicit judgment of the work of art. Implicit in criticism of the work of art is the judgment that the object being criticized is in fact a work of art. In a certain sense, the work of art demands criticism, just as Benjamin later states in "The Task of the Translator" that translatability is an inherent quality of the work of art. Second, other than judging something to be a work of art, no judgment, and no ranking in comparison to other works of art, is either possible or desirable. This is an explicit rejection of a basic tenet of connoisseurship. Third, inferior works cannot be criticized, and should be ignored. We can see that this follows from the idea that criticism is supposed to be positive, and we might link it to two popular notions: all publicity is good publicity, and the most devastating critique is to totally ignore something. Finally, both individual works of art and art as a whole are indivisible. This is related to the notion that one cannot rank works of art, and that all works of art are reflecting upon their nature, not just as a statue or a poem or a painting, but as *art* (otherwise they would not be art and the critic could not criticize them).

At this point, Benjamin has an aside about the concept of irony, which he sees as a type of self-consciousness of the work which assails the work of art without destroying it, much as the critic "dissolves" the work of art in order to transform it. The ironic mode seems to be linked to prose, as opposed to poetry; and this has important consequences for the status of the language used in criticism, which is also prose.

Some Consequences

Because of the above definitions, the qualities of the work of art, and the process of criticism, Benjamin then draws out certain consequences of this philosophy.

First of all, he claims that the Romantic idea of poetry is progressive (in the grammatical sense, always becoming; Benjamin's philosophy is one of becoming, not being) and universal (since each poem is part of the whole of art). Here we see links to the founding of comparative literature in the early nineteenth century, based on a search for universals in literature.

Second, he believes that the novel is the most self-reflexive and self-contained art form. This is related to the fact that it is widely seen as the most ironic art form, and this insight is picked up later by members of the Frankfurt School, especially Lukács (1971). Again, to draw parallels to other thinkers, we might compare Bakhtin's elevation of the status of the novel to that of the highest art form because it is the most self-aware (1981). Prose, not poetry, is thus the "creative grounds of poetic forms"; prose is also the language of criticism.

Third, Benjamin believes that there is a sobriety at the heart of art. It is the duty of criticism to draw out this "prosaic kernel" from the work of art. Here we see a link to one of the famous metaphors in "The Task of the Translator," where the language of the translation is said to envelope the kernel of the work of art loosely, like some royal robe.

Fourth, and finally, for Benjamin the work of art is not static; rather, it unfolds over time, and criticism is the means

by which this happens. Here I must pause to note that, for Benjamin, the Romantic notion of the self-reflective nature of all things, but especially of the work of art, means that everything in the universe is *alive*. This is meant in its most literal sense. Once we have grasped this, the terms that Benjamin uses to describe translations (Nachleben and Überleben, both translated as "afterlife" in the English edition) begin to make more sense.

From the Romantics to Goethe

Benjamin subsequently makes a comparison between the Romantic understanding of art and Goethe's. For Benjamin, Goethe believes in an *a priori* ideal of art, which is then expressed imperfectly in individual works. In other words, he is essentially a Platonist. Therefore, ancient Greek works, which approach this ideal most closely, are prototypes to be studied and imitated. Also, for Goethe, the *a priori* ideal of art means that art cannot be criticized.

The Romantics, however, do not believe in an *a priori* ideal, and therefore do not believe in the existence of prototypes to be imitated. As a corollary, the Romantics believed that not only is criticism of the work of art possible, but that in fact modern criticism is responsible for the creation of classical Greek art as we understand it today. This is a surprisingly modern, even post-modern, understanding of the relationship between art and criticism, and the way we reshape the past for the needs of the present.

In sum, Goethe focuses on content, or the ideal of art, while the Romantics focus on form, or the idea. Benjamin suggests in closing that these are in fact two sides of one problem, and that their interaction constitutes the history of art.

Relation to "The Task of the Translator"

It should be clear that there are several important points of convergence between Benjamin's doctoral thesis and his later essay on translation.

First and foremost for me, and the point that I think has been neglected to date, is the belief that the work of art is alive. I mentioned above that I find Benjamin's understanding of this to be the most difficult part of his thesis to take seriously. Yet I believe it is crucial to understanding the first two pages of "The Task of the Translator." It also leads, as I mentioned, to the startling contemporary conclusion that Greek works of art have been created by modern criticism, because if the work of art is alive, then it is capable of growth and change over time. Yet just as all living organisms need sustenance to accomplish this (as we understand the term today, I mean biological), so too the work of art cannot change and grow by itself; it needs something from outside. That something is provided by two categories of people: critics and translators.

The second point of convergence, then, is the link between criticism and translation as homologous operations. This insight has also borne fruit in contemporary criticism, notably hermeneutics, wherein every act of understanding is an interpretation, or translation. Steiner's *After Babel* (1975) contains perhaps the best exposition of this position in translation studies, but the notion that the translator is the work of art's best critic is a commonplace in the field. Furthermore, if we paraphrase slightly Benjamin's definition of art as a determination of the medium of reflection, and criticism as the knowledge of the object in this medium, we can easily arrive at the statement: a translation is the fixing of a particular interpretation (criticism) of a work of art by the translator (critic) in a new language (medium).

The third point of convergence is the notion of the importance of the work of art, and the role that criticism and translation have in moving it toward an absolute. Benjamin does not seem to believe that the work of art can ever arrive at perfection, but it is the nature of the act of criticism and translation that it improves the work of art. In Benjamin's writings, art seems to be elevated to a special status as the only product of humanity capable of striving toward perfection.

Because of these three points, the first paragraph of "The Task of the Translator," "In the appreciation of a work of art or an

art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful […]. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience," (Benjamin, 1996a, p. 253) so shocking to many people, should be obvious. A work of art is something that is alive, that unfolds over time through a complex process of continued criticism and translation. Just as we as human beings do not feel that we need to justify our existence by reference to anything outside of the unfolding of our lives, so too, the work of art is an autonomous, living entity whose existence justifies itself without reference to an audience. For the same reason, Benjamin's understanding of translatability as something intrinsic to the work of art becomes clearer. Just as the work of art calls for the critic to interpret it so that it can grow and develop, so too it calls for translation. Moreover, if a work is not art, it will not be translatable, just as it cannot be criticized. Here again I find Benjamin's understanding of the relation between art and criticism/translation startlingly contemporary. What makes art art? The critics. Something created by a person who calls themselves an artist is not necessarily a work of art in Benjamin's definition; it is only when a critic has something interesting to say about a work of art, or a translator produces an interesting translation of it in another language, that the nature of the work of art is revealed. Duchamp placing a urinal in a public art gallery is merely a joke until a critic (here I should point out that the artist herself may be a critic, and often is, through the use of paratextual material around the work of art they have created) has something interesting to say about it.

Benjamin's decision to call translation a "form" obviously relates to his discussion of the Romantics as concerned first and foremost with the form of the work, as opposed to Goethe, who is concerned with content. In this reading, Goethe would probably be allied with semiotic approaches to translation. Also, the notion of a nucleus (Benjamin, 1996a, p. 261) seems to be the same as the prosaic "kernel" which criticism reveals.

Finally, Benjamin's discussion of form and self-limitation (knowing where to stop) is echoed in the closing paragraph of "The Task of the Translator," where the figure of Hölderin descending into the abyss of language is abruptly halted by Holy

Writ. This reference to Holy Writ as being able to arrest the otherwise potentially endless process of criticism/translation/interpretation makes explicit what is only implicit in the earlier *Concept of Criticism*: the theological underpinnings of this ideal.

The Afterlife of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"

At the beginning of this paper I noted that Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," widely viewed as dense, allusive, and difficult, had been used to support a variety of positions in translation studies. On one level, Benjamin's own concept of criticism authorizes such "use" of his work, especially if we accept an expanded definition of "work of art" to include objects, such as his own writings, which inspire critics to engage in self-criticism after having made them part of their own consciousness. The continued interpretation of Benjamin's writings by later critics is thus testimony to the status of his writing as art.

However, we might turn the question around and ask, not whether we are justified in interpreting Benjamin's writings, but whether Benjamin's writings are a proper ground for our own reflection.

Let me begin with an example that relates to my final point of convergence between the two works by Benjamin: that there is a stopping point to critical self-reflection, and that this stopping point, for translation at least (but by implication for criticism also) is related to Holy Writ. As I mentioned in an aside, it seems clear to me that there are parallels between Benjamin's notion of the infinitely regressive nature of self-reflection and Derrida's notion of meaning being infinitely deferred along a chain of signification. However, Derrida clearly rejects the idea that Holy Writ or anything else puts an end to this process; for Derrida there is not, and can never be, an end to this process. The never-ending nature of it is precisely the point. Yet if Benjamin is drawing on theological concepts for the end of this process, which Derrida rejects, might it also be true that Benjamin is drawing on theological concepts for the beginning of this process and, if so,

what are the implications for Derrida's work?[7] More importantly, if we reject the theological argument that a particular text (the Bible) has special status, are there other elements of Benjamin's argument that also fall to the ground (whatever that new ground may be)? Is his notion of the potentially infinite nature of reflection in the universe also founded on beliefs that we do not accept? If so, where does that leave us?

In a similar fashion, I noted that Benjamin's concept of criticism is based on the Romantic division of thought into two different processes, self-reflection and criticism, and objects as being alive and self-reflective in a literal sense. I do not think that many people today would take these positions seriously. Yet many of the conclusions that Benjamin reaches based on these premises have been enthusiastically embraced in translation studies, literary criticism, and post-structuralist thought. How is this possible?

This sleight-of-hand has been accomplished mainly through a metaphorization of Benjamin's work. Instead of believing that the work of art is literally alive, this statement is read metaphorically. In a paper on metaphors of translation through history and their relevance to translation practice today, Hermans provides a good example: "[…]Walter Benjamin has been more influential than any other modern theorist in generating new metaphors of translation. In a difficult, almost mystical essay of 1923 he spoke of translation as the 'afterlife' of a text" (Hermans and Stecconi, 2002, p. 13). The use of quotation marks around the word afterlife and the placement of this statement immediately after a statement on Benjamin's rich use of metaphor clearly indicates that Hermans is reading afterlife metaphorically. He also prefaces his remarks on Benjamin by referring to the essay as difficult and mystical, as I noted above. The way in which our understanding of the work of art changes the nature of the work of art *for us* is *likened to* a living, organic process. But of course "we" know that such statements are not "real," or to be taken seriously.

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7 See Johnston (1999, pp. 45-47) for a discussion of Benjamin's pure language as a theological notion.

Returning to Benjamin's text once again, we can see on one level that this metaphorical reading of his thinking is authorized by his own style of writing, for "The Task of the Translator" is itself full of metaphors. There are at least four major ones: the relation between the content and language is likened to skin and fruit in the original language, and to rich robes enveloping a kernel in the translation (p. 258); the process of translation is likened to calling into the forest of language and listening for the echo of the original (pp. 258-259); the original and the translation are likened to fragments of a broken vessel (p. 260); and the relation between translation and original is likened to that of a tangent to a circle (p. 261). Moreover, all of these metaphors have become famous within translation studies, and themselves been subject to endless discussion. They are also frequently used, in titles of articles; Menke (2002) and Weber (2005) in the bibliography are but two examples. It is no wonder later readers feel that other portions of Benjamin's text can be read metaphorically.

However, the fact that Benjamin's work uses several metaphors, and we therefore feel authorized to read other sections metaphorically, is unwarranted. When discussing the concept of afterlife, Benjamin goes out of his way to reject such a possible interpretation of his work: "The idea of life and afterlife in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. Even in times of narrowly prejudiced thought, there was an inkling that life was not limited to organic corporeality […]. The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has a history of its own, and is not merely the setting for history, is credited with life" (1996, pp. 254-255). Hence my insistence earlier that we need to accept this premise from German Romanticism if we are to understand Benjamin's concept of translation.

This topic opens up onto at least two broadly related paths.

The first is the relation between literal and figurative language in philosophy and translation studies. There is a long tradition of dividing language into these two categories and

treating figurative language with suspicion in philosophy, reaching back at least to Aristotle. Andrew Benjamin (1989) gives an excellent overview of the problems involved, while Ortony (1979) treats the more specific question of how the struggle to establish scientific discourse as a repository of truth led to the rejection of metaphors as a way of conceptualizing problems, a trend which has slowly been challenged in the late twentieth century, but is still widespread. Likewise, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) succeeded in arguing that metaphoric language was far more pervasive, and important, in both everyday and specialized discourse. Ortony (1979) is particularly relevant in translation studies if we think of the way in which, during the 1950s and 1960s, the attempt to build up translation studies as a science under linguistics led to a suspicion of metaphors in translation studies. However, as D'Hulst (1992), Round (2005) and St. André (2010) have shown, figurative language has played a vital role in the development of translation studies and deserves closer study. How important is it, for example, that many of the most famous dictums in translation studies are metaphors?

The second is the role of belief systems in the establishment of translation studies as a discipline. Much has been written on the importance of the Biblical translation tradition on the development of theories of translation in general. Tymoczko (2009) argues that the use of the term "verbum" to translate "logos" from the Greek led to a shift of the original meaning of "logos," which in turn led to the preoccupation in religious circles with translation of verbum (words) rather than sensum (sense) in the late medieval period, wherein the latter term was more usually associated with gisting of texts. Furthermore, the term "translation" in English derives from the Latin "translatio," which was originally used to indicate the relocation of holy relics; thus our very term to refer to interlinguistic transfer is based on a metaphor for the transportation of relics of the saints.

Why, for example, does Derrida need to draw on the myth of the Tower of Babel for his musings on translation, philosophy, and language? And why, when Karin Littau (2000) is unhappy with that myth, does she propose the alternative of Pandora's box, rather than move away from such myths altogether?

These questions deserve more attention than I can devote to them here; I will merely suggest that Paul de Man's work *Blindness and Insight* (1983) might be very useful in thinking about these issues.

Conclusion

At the beginning, I suggested that Benjamin's essay was an expression of his own ideas about art and criticism. The fact that, two years later, he comes back to many of these ideas as the basis for his essay on translation supports this reading. Finally, it should be clear that Benjamin's exposition of German Romantic criticism is itself a transformation, an unfolding of this earlier philosophy, rather than a simple reporting thereon. His work is itself an excellent example of an act of self-reflection in the best sense of the term—or a translation, one which encourages us to continue down the path of self-reflection upon which he set out.

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ABSTRACT: Revisiting Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator" in Light of His *Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism* — Walter Benjamin's essay "The Task of the Translator," the most widely cited twentieth century philosophical statement on translation, is commonly seen as one of the most opaque and misunderstood essays in the field. This paper uses a close reading of Benjamin's doctoral thesis, "The Concept of Criticism in German Romanticism," to throw light on his thoughts on translation. I argue that the German Romantics' definition of art, and art's relation to criticism, are crucial to understanding why Benjamin conceived of translation as an "afterlife" of the work of art, why he believed that translatability is an innate quality of the work of art, and why he speaks of translation as moving the work of art onto a higher plane. I read Benjamin's own essay on translation as a sort of "criticism" which seeks to "translate" the philosophical ideals of the Romantics, and thus give them an afterlife, and then reflect upon the implications for translation studies today.

RÉSUMÉ : Relire « La tâche du traducteur » par Walter Benjamin d'après son *Concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand* — « La tâche du traducteur » de Walter Benjamin, sans doute l'une des prises de position philosophiques

sur la traduction les plus citées du XX^e^ siècle, est souvent considéré comme l'un des essais les plus obscurs et mal compris de la discipline. L'article propose de clarifier la pensée de Benjamin sur la traduction à l'aide d'une analyse détaillée de sa thèse de doctorat, *Le concept de critique esthétique dans le romantisme allemand*. En effet, la définition de l'art et la relation entre art et critique proposées par les romantiques allemands sont des notions essentielles pour bien comprendre pourquoi Benjamin conçoit la traduction comme une « survie » de l'œuvre, pourquoi il croit que la traduisibilité est une qualité intrinsèque de cette dernière et pourquoi il fait référence à la traduction comme à un moyen de transporter une œuvre vers les sphères supérieures. La thèse de Benjamin est vue ici comme une « critique » qui vise à « traduire » l'idéal philosophique des romantiques, leur offrant ainsi leur « survie ». Une réflexion sur la portée de ces considérations pour la traductologie suit.

Keywords: Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Schlegel, German Romanticism, philosophy of translation, "The Task of the Translator," afterlife

Mots-clés : Walter Benjamin, Friedrich Schlegel, romantisme allemand, philosophie de la traduction, « La tâche du traducteur », la survie

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