

# “Wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde berührt” Translation in Walter Benjamin’s Early Writings

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**Abstract** The article aims at analysing the concept of translation in Walter Benjamin’s early writings, especially with reference to the essays *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (On Language as Such and on the Language of Man, 1916) and *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (The Task of the Translator, 1921) but also taking other contemporary writings into consideration. It is shown how the concept of translation, inextricably linked to Benjamin’s reflection on language, draws on the one hand on the hermeneutics of early German Romanticism and on its reflection on translation and on the other is charged with the entire semantics of Jewish messianism, in continuous confluences of which the concepts of pure language (*reine Sprache*), transformation (*Verwandlung*), of the unintentional (*intentionlos*) and the inexpressive (*ausdruckslos*) are the most evident precipitate.

**Keywords** Walter Benjamin. Translation. Language. Source language. Target language. German Romanticism. Messianism.

**Summary** 1 *Über Sprache überhaupt*: Adamic Translation. – 2 Semantic Proliferation and the Infinite Task of Romantic Hermeneutics. – 3 The Task of the Translator. – 4 Language Reversal and Silence.



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## 1 **Über Sprache überhaupt: Adamic Translation**

In mid-August 1916, Gershom Scholem spends three days in Seeshaupt, Bavaria, where Benjamin has been spending the summer with Dora Pollak. The two play chess and go over Socrates' speech in Plato's *Symposium*, discussing every topic under the sun, in particular Kant and German idealism. At the same time, Benjamin reads an ode of Pindar both in the original and in the famous translation by Hölderlin, while tracing an embryonic line of thought on language which best tolerates - now, but also later on in his life - the definition of *Sprachdenken* rather than that of *Sprachphilosophie*, which is more systematic and rigid due to its claim of being complete.

Once home, thinking back on the conversations he had in Seeshaupt, Scholem writes a long letter about language and mathematics to his friend (Eiland, Jennings 2015-16, 74-5). In a letter from Benjamin to Scholem, dated 11 November 1916, we learn that the answer - which Benjamin had formulated only a week prior - to the many questions posed by his friend in his previous letter - ends abruptly on page eighteen due to the far-reaching implications and the impossibility of outlining them briefly. To bring into clearer focus the subject at hand, Benjamin turns his letter into an essay, though he fails to address the relationship between language, mathematics and the Messianic idea, which he deems "unendlich schwer [...]" ("infinitely complex", Author's transl.) and, for the moment, beyond his ken. Benjamin thus reveals the subject of his forthcoming essay, while providing a short summary of it - "[das] Wesen der Sprache [...] in immanenter Beziehung auf das Judentum und mit Beziehung auf die ersten Kapitel der Genesis" (Benjamin 1995, 343)<sup>1</sup> - as well as its title, *Über Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen* (On Language as Such and on the Language of Man), which, he admits, makes a certain systematic attempt without, however, ridding the essay of its inevitably fragmentary nature, which Benjamin attributes to his still incomplete knowledge of the subject (Benjamin 1995, 343).

His famous and often arduous essay, which he likely wrote between 4 and 9 November 1916 and was left unpublished for a long time, first came out only in 1955 in a volume of Benjamin's selected writings edited by Theodor and Gretel Adorno (Benjamin 1955, 401-19). This is where Benjamin's early observations coalesce for the first time to tackle the problem of language and - despite its troubled genesis, forever on the brink of veering off towards a larger work that was never to be and whose project would ultimately come to an

<sup>1</sup> "The essence of language [...] in immanent relation to Judaism and with reference to the first chapters of Genesis" (Author's transl.).

end in the 1930s<sup>2</sup> - where he outlines a theology of language marked by gnoseological aspects or, in the words of Gianfranco Bonola, a "logo-ontology" (Marcelli 2015) which is, to some extent, still green, though at times vertiginously impenetrable. It does, however, contain the theoretical foundations of Benjamin's hermeneutics of poetry, art and literature, at least from the early stages of his thinking through to *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (The Origin of German Tragic Drama).<sup>3</sup>

In *Über Sprache überhaupt*, already widely reviewed by the critics,<sup>4</sup> Benjamin develops, on the basis of the first chapter of Genesis and the Kabbalistic theory he draws from via Scholem and Franz Joseph Molitor,<sup>5</sup> a theological idea which places the origin of all spiritual manifestations in language, and which categorizes language by degree of purity and perfection, from the divine language of creation, to the pure Adamic name-language all the way to the language of man.

According to Benjamin, in the upper tiers, i.e., the divine tier of creation and perfect knowledge and the Adamic tier of nomination, language does not share anything with instrumentality, mediation of meanings or communicative intention, thus placing itself at the opposite end of the spectrum with respect to meaning and intelligibility, where purity stands out as vehicularity decreases and the logical nexus becomes frayed. Amidst the tangle of concepts of which the pages of *Über Sprache überhaupt* are the first precipitate - and cemented by the books shared and discussed by Benjamin and Scholem in addition to the works on Kabbalistic and, more general-

<sup>2</sup> Starting from 1916, through letters addressed to Scholem, Ernst Schoen and Herbert Blumenthal, Benjamin continues to write on language. This is a priority for Benjamin, who sees the core of his thinking in the essence of language and in the metaphysics of language. It is Benjamin himself who places several of his writings - from the *Erkenntniskritische Vorrede* (Gnoseological Premise) of the *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* to the *Über das mimetische Vermögen* (On the Mimetic Faculty) annotations from 1933, along a spectrum of close affinity precisely in relation to the development and expansion of the same idea of language his 1916 essay was based on. For the genesis of the text and its recurrence across Benjamin's various writings and letters, see comment on *Über Sprache überhaupt* in Benjamin 2008, 635-7.

<sup>3</sup> For further details, see, Menninghaus 1980; Agamben 1983; Prete 1983; Schwepenhäuser 1983; Tedesco 1993; Vitiello 1996; Bröcker 2000; Carchia 2000; Moroncini 2000; 2009; Alberts 2010; Tagliacozzo 2016; Gurisatti 2018.

<sup>4</sup> See Montanelli 2014, 182-95; Ponzi 2014; Tagliacozzo 2014, 304-28; Tagliacozzo 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Along with the discussions with Scholem, the four-volume and incomplete work of the idealist philosopher, theosophist and Freemason Franz Joseph Molitor, the *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* (Molitor 1827-55) is the source Benjamin draws from his knowledge of Jewish mysticism. With Scholem, right before drafting *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin will examine several passages from Molitor's work, which aspires to a *sub specie mystica* amalgam of Judaism, Christianity and idealistic philosophy.

ly, Jewish topics - are the proto-Romantic writings (or, in any case, Counter-Enlightenment writings) on the language of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Georg Hamann as well as a logical, gnosological and mathematical line that crosses Kantianism, neo-Kantianism (especially as based on Hermann Cohen, Heinrich Rickert and Ernst Cassirer), phenomenology (particularly in its Husserlian filiation), and the logical-mathematical line of Gottlob Frege, Bertrand Russell and Henri Poincaré, whose writings Scholem studied more deeply than Benjamin (Tagliacozzo 2014, 313).

In the pages of *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin reveals his interest in translation, which he considers as a genre in its own right, with full status and dignity, and which is not ancillary to other forms of the text, but rather, halfway between literary creation and philosophical speculation. In 1916, while developing and modulating - at the confluence of romanticism and *qabbalah* - the concept of primordial language, where word and thing are consubstantial and perfectly adherent to one another,<sup>6</sup> Benjamin dwells on the concept of translation: the Adamic *nominatio rerum* carries, according to Benjamin, a silent entity towards its sound configuration and this movement is, quite literally, a *translation*. A passage from the inaudible to the audible, from the nameless to the name. By a translational process, man receives from God the mute and nameless language of things and translates it into sound, into a name-language: "Die Sprache der Dinge kann in die Sprache der Erkenntnis und des Namens nur in der Übersetzung eingehen" (Benjamin 1972, 152).<sup>7</sup> In doing so, Benjamin therefore invites us to consider translation not only as an interlingual dynamic, but also as an intralinguistic process, as a profound and foundational structure of the language:

Es ist notwendig, den Begriff der Übersetzung in der tiefsten Schicht der Sprachtheorie zu begründen, denn er ist viel zu weittragend und gewaltig, um in irgendeiner Hinsicht nachträglich, wie bisweilen gemeint wird, abgehandelt werden zu können. (Benjamin 1977, 151)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> The idea of language in Benjamin - at the first level of creative and intradivine spirituality and, soon after, in the round Adamic compactness of the name-language - revolves around an ontological core and is defined as a deep gash into essence, in a continuity of thought that also leads to Rosenzweig and Heidegger who, along with Benjamin, share similar thoughts on primordial language and its substantiality.

<sup>7</sup> "The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation" (Benjamin 1996, 70-1).

<sup>8</sup> "It is necessary to found the concept of translation at the deepest level of linguistic theory, for it is much too far-reaching and powerful to be treated in any way as an afterthought, as has happened occasionally" (Benjamin 1996, 69).

The fall of the tower and the ensuing *confusio linguarum* therefore gives rise to a plurality of translations, as many as there are languages: "Soviel Übersetzungen, soviel Sprachen, sobald nämlich der Mensch einmal aus dem paradiesischen Zustand, der nur eine Sprache kannte, gefallen ist" (Benjamin 1977, 152).<sup>9</sup> The passage from the mute language to the name-language is, therefore, a transformation and a change of forms. In a word, a metamorphosis. Indeed, in Benjamin's view, translation opens up to "ein Kontinuum von Verwandlungen" (Benjamin 1977, 151).<sup>10</sup> For now, in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin only makes a cursory mention of the transmutation that language at its highest stage – Adam's imposition of the pure name – entails or of the promise of transformation it inherently holds.

It is clear that Benjamin's early interest in translation is the result of the study of early Romantic literature, in particular of Friedrich Schlegel, which began in 1916 and grew in the summer of 1917, during his stay at the sanatorium in Dachau, and which he funnelled into his doctoral thesis *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (The concept of criticism in German Romanticism), presented in 1919 before the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Bern. To be sure, the Romantics focused heavily – both speculatively and practically – on translation, and it is therefore worth returning briefly to the Romantic idea of translation to better contextualize how this fed into Benjamin's thought on language and translation.

## 2 Semantic Proliferation and the Infinite Task of Romantic Hermeneutics

In early Romantic aesthetics and theory of art, translation occupies a place of paramount importance. While the classics of European literature, from Shakespeare to Dante to Calderón to Petrarch, reach the German readership in translation thanks to the great and remarkable foresight of August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, translation undergoes a conceptual extension, acquiring a philosophical dimension.<sup>11</sup> It is the communicative acts themselves – whether oral or written – that are considered, first of all by August Wilhelm Schlegel himself, as acts of translation. Indeed, vis-à-vis the partial views Hamann and Herder already expressed in the late Enlightenment, translation must be poetic, saving – as far as it is possible – not only the meaning, but also the form of the original text. According

<sup>9</sup> "So many translations, so many languages – once man has fallen from the paradisiacal state that knew only one language" (Benjamin 1996, 71).

<sup>10</sup> "A continuum of transformations" (Benjamin 1996, 70).

<sup>11</sup> On translation in German Romanticism, see Kofler 2006, 3-13 and Nicoletti 2002.

to Friedrich Schlegel, one of the founders and perhaps the greatest theoretician of early German Romanticism, translation is an integral part of the encyclopaedic, unattainable project set forth in the well-known fragment 116 of the magazine *Athenäum* for a *progressive Universalpoesie* (universal and progressive poetry). As for this project, translation confirms – through the infinite and asymptotic approximation to the original which is inherent in translation – its character of endless becoming and necessary incompleteness. With philology, according to Romantic theorists, translation shares exactness and scientificity, adding an artistic value to it. Translation is involved in the Romantic utopia, in that "augmented and enhanced reality" which is always engaged – in a process that is both idealistically transcendental and self-reflective – in the pursuit of apparently tangible goals that are always elusive, thus ultimately becoming a self-involved discourse that falls back onto itself. A desire of desire, a poetry of poetry, a translation of translation. In a word, unending semiosis. From this dual perspective, since language is already in itself a poetic and creative translation of reality and poetry is a metaphorical representation of the world, literary translation becomes in turn – according to the lesson of the *Kunstlehre* (The Doctrine of Art, 1801-02) by August Wilhelm Schlegel, in the self-reflexive and metalinguistic meaning – "Poesie der Poesie" ("poetry of poetry") (Schlegel 1963, 226).

Similarly, with Novalis, the literary translator becomes "Dichter des Dichters" ("poet of the poet"; (Novalis 1993, 384) in fragment 68 of the famous collection of aphorisms titled *Blüthenstaub* (Pollen 1798). Along the same lines, according to the brilliant interpretation of Peter Kofler (2006, 5), translation in the Romantic era ceases to be governed by the logic of replacing source words with equivalent words in the target language, but it is understood instead metaphorically as a continuous hermeneutic act which opens up to perspectives of polyvalence and semantic proliferation. The shifting character (*Verschiebung*) of the metaphor – the displacement of a term from one domain to another with the resemanticization it causes – clearly concerns Romantic theoretical activity and speculation. Likewise, translation, understood as a metaphorical process, causes, quite literally, the displacement of a text from one cultural episteme to another, thus bringing about an effect comparable to metaphorical estrangement, altering the structure and expanding the expressive possibilities in the target language. Just as a metaphor must show its origin in order to be alive and effective, so too Romantic translation must be retrospective, i.e., looking back on the pre-text, to recover those traits of the original that can cause an estrangement effect – or even obscurity, albeit a productive sort of obscurity – in the target language:

E se la metafora, in quanto predicazione insostituibile, produce un plusvalore semantico, un sapere nuovo o addirittura una realtà prima inesistente, anche alla traduzione deve essere attribuita una funzione cognitiva, epistemologica, perfino demiurgica. (Kofler 2006, 4)<sup>12</sup>

The pellucid project for total translatability, which had underpinned Enlightenment thinking, is thus replaced in the Romantic era by the principle of inherent obscurity, fragmentation and substantial untranslatability which, nonetheless, paves the way to new possibilities of signification, evoking the form of the original, reflected in the translated text. Hence the idea, which is central to Romantic hermeneutics, that translating and even more so understanding are never guaranteed from the start, but are based on the endless task of continuing to understand and of always understanding differently.

Every hermeneutical act therefore originates from extraneousness and lack of understanding; knowledge is the result of misunderstanding and the potential obscurity of a text, which must be accepted and respected in the way it presents itself. And which must be left obscure, should that be the writer's intention. Before a scientific, objectifying and grammatical analysis is conducted, the subjective-comparative-divinatory method must be adopted in addition to focusing on the creator, the analysis that goes back to the source, to the set of experiences - thoughts, feelings, intentions - from which the writing originates, together with empathy and the identification (*Einführung*) with the text. In short, the sense of identity comes from and depends on being able to tell the difference. Each interpreter must necessarily go through the foreign and extraneous constitution of the text to convey new meaning and a new discourse. This is the trajectory of Romantic hermeneutics, from its canonization in Friedrich Schleiermacher to its last filiation in Wilhelm Dilthey at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

The Romantic theory of language thus asks the translator not to render the content expressed in the source language in the forms of another language, but to reproduce - perhaps more suitably while maintaining all its demiurgic component, i.e., to recreate - the same

<sup>12</sup> "And if the metaphor, as an irreplaceable predication, generates a semantic surplus value, new knowledge or even a previously non-existent reality, then translation, too, must be given a cognitive, epistemological, or even demiurgic role" (Author's transl.).

<sup>13</sup> One cannot help but refer here to Antoine Berman's brilliant study *L'épreuve de l'étranger. Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique* (1984). According to Berman, who elaborates in his work a veritable modern theory of translation *sub specie philosophica*, the perspective on translation can - better than other approaches - scrutinize the German cultural tradition as it probes the deep and tormented relationship German culture has with what is 'extraneous', foreign and, in general, with otherness.

effect caused by the original text on the reader. The translator is therefore urged to react to the inherent indeterminacy and obscurity of the source text with an equal degree of obscurity and fragmentation in the target language or, in other words, to avoid smoothing out what is rough in origin. If, as Cesare Giacobazzi (Giacobazzi 2017, 81) strongly emphasizes, the elimination of obscurity in the Enlightenment paradigm is an indispensable condition in translation, the only premise and guarantee that makes the transition possible – that *Übergang* that played a major role in Kant's later works, especially in his third Critique – from one language to another, thereby emphasizing the universal and cosmopolitan concept – first and foremost of the Enlightenment – of linguistic and cultural mediation, the Romantic idea of translation stresses the need for a "valorizzazione dell'oscurità" (Giacobazzi 2017, 81; "setting value on obscurity", Author's transl.) which must not be removed in the transition from one language to another. This perspective rids us of the illusion of a full and total understanding, of a linearity without any residue, granting full legitimacy to that irreducibly obscure part which is consubstantial with language and which cannot be eluded.

With Walter Benjamin, the Romantic idea of translation results in one of the most direct and explicit filiations (Guarnieri 2009). While giving the Romantic episteme a Jewish slant to which we will return later, Benjamin inherits both the content and the fragmentary form from the writings of Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis and other Romantics. A prose which tends to be rhapsodic and incomplete, often paradoxical, underpinned more frequently by implications, implicit references and logical leaps rather than by perspicuous associations. The contiguity with early Romantic theories is evident, for example, when in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, language is defined in its immediate, magical and infinite character.<sup>14</sup> As regards the name-language,

**14** Especially in Schlegel, language takes on the features of a self-absorbed mystical grammar, circular in its pneumatic self-reflection, where form is content and content is form. An infinite grammar, whose end resides in itself, which is oriented to the sum of its parts, to totality: "Magie ist mystische γρ (Grammatik)" – states Friedrich Schlegel in fragment 376 – "und scheint immer auf Totalität zu beruhen". (Menninghaus 1980, 29; "Magic is mystical γρ (grammar) and always seems to be based on totality", Author's transl.). Likewise, in the pages of *Über die Sprache*, the name-language communicates the spiritual essence without reservation and in its entirety. Thus this gives rise to that "intensive Totalität der Sprache" (Benjamin 1972, 151; "intensive totality of the language", Benjamin 1996, 65), a clear Romantic reference that shows, in the utmost density of the name, the intensity of an essential word, the increased purity of a communication without fractures and extended to infinity in its possibilities of combination. The infinite combinatorial chain of this grammar metonymically leads to the Kabbalistic method and it is Schlegel himself who declares, in the brevity of the formula, the equivalence "Kabb(ala) γρ1 / 0 (unendliche Grammatik)", Schlegel 1963 in Menninghaus 1980, 29; "Kabb(ala) γρ1 / 0 (infinite grammar)", Author's transl. Or again, in an annotation from 1812: "Die kabbalistische Grammatik sehr zu studieren. Es ist dar-



Benjamin radicalizes the Romantic assumption. Because it adheres immediately to things, the pure name-language does not tolerate mediation, pitting itself against any transfer of information. The result being that communication itself – understood as linguistic and informational *transfer*<sup>15</sup> – is sidestepped and denied. In *Über Sprache überhaupt*, Benjamin strips any legitimacy from the act of communicating *through*,<sup>16</sup> from transmissive communication, from what he calls "die bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache" (Benjamin 1977, 414).<sup>17</sup> After the fall of Adam and the tower – two episodes Benjamin ties metonymically together and which he considers in the same plane – the single language becomes fragmented and multiplies in the chaotic dispersion of multiple languages. Starting from the disobedience of Adam and the arrogance of the builders of Babel onwards, language becomes communication, mediation, and intentionality. For Benjamin, on the contrary, the name-language is an absolute and uncon-

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in etwas Wundervolles in dem Bau der Sprache verborgen" (Schlegel 1995, 358); "The Kabbalistic grammar is to be studied very much. There is something wonderful hidden in the structure of the language", Author's transl. Up to the clear aesthetic turn that Romanticism imparts to the Kabbalah, a modulation expressed by Schlegel, without uncertainty, in a 1802 note contained in *Fragmente zur Poesie und Litteratur II* (Fragments on poetry and literature II): "Die wahre Ästhetik ist die Kabbala" (Schlegel 1991, 305); "The true aesthetics is the Kabbalah", Author's transl.

**15** "Nicht, was an einem geistigen Wesen mitteilbar ist, *erscheint* am klarsten in seiner Sprache, wie noch eben im *Übergange* gesagt wurde, sondern dieses *Mittelbare* ist unmittelbar die Sprache selbst" (Benjamin 1977, 42); "Not that which *appears* most clearly in its language is communicable in a mental entity, as was just said by way of *transition*, but this capacity for communication is language itself" (Benjamin 1996, 63-4). The italics "Übergang" and "transition" are mine, other italics can be found in the editions referred to. In this denial of the linguistic transition, a challenge to and refutation of Kantian ideas are recognisable. In 1916, the year *Über Sprache überhaupt* was written, Benjamin attended Moritz Geiger's lectures on the *Critique of Judgment* in Munich during the summer term. The concept of *Übergang* ("transition") from the sensible to the supersensible and from theory to practice occupies Kant's later output, starting precisely with the third Critique. For reference, see Kant 1908, 175-6; It. trans. by Gargiulo, Kant 1997, 21. Nonetheless, the true Kantian year for Benjamin is perhaps 1918, when, together with Scholem, he grapples with the Kantian filiation in the Marburg School while reading *Kant's Theory of Experience* by Hermann Cohen (Cohen 1871 It. Trans. by Bertolini, Cohen 1990), resulting in a detachment and critical stance. Also published in 1918 is *Über das Programm der kommenden Philosophie* (Program of the coming philosophy, Benjamin 1977b, 157-71, It. trans. by Moscati, Benjamin 2008, 329-41), a project aimed at revising the whole Kantian system.

**16** "Was teilt die Sprache mit? Sie teilt das ihr entsprechende geistige Wesen mit. Es ist fundamental zu wissen, daß dieses geistige Wesen sich in der Sprache mitteilt und nicht durch die Sprache [...] Das geistige Wesen teilt sich in einer Sprache und nicht durch eine Sprache mit – das heißt: es ist nicht von außen gleich dem sprachlichen Wesen" (Benjamin 1977, 142); "What does language communicate? It communicates the mental being corresponding to it. It is fundamental that this mental being communicates itself *in* language and not *through* language [...] Mental being communicates itself in, not through, a language, which means that it is not outwardly identical with linguistic being" (Benjamin 1996, 63).

**17** "The bourgeois conception of language" (Benjamin 1996, 65).

ditional word. It spreads out instantly and it communicates immediately. It does not convey meaning, nor does it mediate significance.

The pure name-language of Adam is therefore without *intention* and without *expression*, thus foreshadowing two concepts which, between 1916 and 1921, i.e., between *Über Sprache überhaupt* and *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, come to the fore on several occasions.<sup>18</sup>

The name-language is attached to things. It does not bind things to one another. As such, it is an *inside*, not a *through*, not an *over* or an *across*. It is therefore in this sense that the famous distinction made by Benjamin at the beginning of *Über Sprache überhaupt*, between *Mittel* and *Medium*, between mediated and medial, between the vehicular-instrumental function of communication and the language that communicates itself immediately must be understood. Almost as if Benjamin – who, at this juncture, is Kantian under many respects, though still markedly divergent – recognized in the language itself – the language that speaks in the name and that in the name grasps the essence of the thing – a new formula for the *Ding an sich*.<sup>19</sup> A formula imbued with the European philosophy of language – Frege

<sup>18</sup> As far as the 'inexpressive' is concerned, the early fragment from 1919 *Analogie und Verwandtschaft* (Analogy and Affinity, Benjamin 1985, 43-5, It. trans. by Boarini, Benjamin 2014, 39-41) is worth mentioning. In this fragment, written in the years that separate the two essays on language (1916 and 1921, respectively), the *ausdruckslos* (inexpressive) category first appears before taking centre stage in the subsequent essay on Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, (*Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften*, Benjamin 1974; 2008, 523-89). Regarding the unintentional (*intentionlos*) several annotations date from the 1910s and the 1920s. The rejection of the *intentio*, of the communicative aim, is an integral part of Benjamin's early thinking on language; it will continue to be so even after the two essays of 1916 and 1921, for example in the lapidary and almost apodictic fragment of 1923 "Diese Sprache der intentionlosen Wahrheit (d.i. der Sache selbst) hat Autorität" ("This language of intentionless truth (i.e. of the thing itself) has authority", Author's trans.), where the linguistic-metaphysical idea is transferred into the domain of politics or political theology (*Zum Thema Einzelwissenschaft und Philosophie* [On the theme of single science and philosophy], Benjamin 1985b, 50-1, trans. it. by Schiavoni, Benjamin 2014, 45-6). Later, in *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (Origin of the German Tragic Drama), the "death of intention" (*der Tod der Intention*) will be asserted several times and categorically, Benjamin 1974b, 203-430, It. trans. by Cuniberto, Benjamin 2001, 69-269. Benjamin's reflections on the concept of intention – as well as on the concepts of denotation, meaning, and logic – also reveal his close confrontation since the late 1910s with the contemporary philosophy of language. As mentioned above, Benjamin's logical-mathematical interests represent a precise debt of the German philosopher to his friend Gershom Scholem, who had attended some lectures given by Gottlob Frege at the University of Jena. Traces of the two friends' discussions remain in a number of fragments from 1916-17, such as *Das Urteil der Bezeichnung* (The Judgement of Designation) and *Lösungsversuch des Russellschen Paradoxons* (Attempt to solve Russell's paradox), where Benjamin tries to offer a solution to Bertrand Russell's paradox, in antithesis to his thought. See Chitussi 2013, 143-54; Oliva 2014, 211-25; Palma 2014, 226-40.

<sup>19</sup> To set himself apart from Kantian gnoseology, and perhaps foreshadowing the aesthetics of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Benjamin uses the term *Sache an sich*, rather than Kant's *Ding an sich*.

and Wittgenstein above all<sup>20</sup> – but especially with the Kabbalistic interpretation and its meditation on the Name, which Benjamin receives through Scholem.

Be that as it may, with his idea of the original language (*Ursprache*) – a concept halfway between the Romantic and the Kabbalistic, in which word and thing belong together<sup>21</sup> – Benjamin does away with

**20** See Tagliacozzo 2003; Stern 2019.

**21** The notion of the Adamic and primordial language, supra-individual and meta-historical, is developed by Kabbalistic thinking. As Gershom Scholem maintains, the Kabbalists reflect – while developing the subject further and variedly – on the biblical and Talmudic concepts about the origin of the world from the divine word, starting from the assumption that a metaphysics of language does not start only with esoteric currents of Jewish thought but it is inherent in the Torah itself, since the concepts of creation and revelation, in their metaphysical dimension, possess an essentially linguistic nature (see Jacobson 2003, 123-8). The idea of language as a vehicle for creation is already present in what is considered the oldest Kabbalistic text, the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Illumination); subsequently, creation as a hermeneutic act is further articulated in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendour), the *locus classicus* of the Jewish *qabbalah*. In the Zoharic imaginary, the line that crosses the triad God-Torah-Israel, bringing its components together, is the ontological status bestowed on Hebrew, which is not only the language of the creation of everything, but also the real *Ursprache*, the primordial language that reveals the intimate substance of being and does not allow reproduction by any other language, not even by Aramaic, considered by some medieval thinkers to be of equal importance and identical value. Later, in his attempts to summarize and categorize the different Kabbalistic schools, Mosheh Cordovero sees in the language of the *Torah*, which in itself contains all creation, the result of a chain of transformations starting from a primordial and hidden language in which the deep structure of reality is anchored and which would be subject to changes through the ages. Cordovero's theory posits a linguistic and ontological correspondence between language and the world that are mutually determining. Although not a linguistic theory of creation in and of itself, the Lurian Kabbalah sheds further light on language as the vehicle and instrument of creation and as the ultimate substance of the world. The three constitutive moments of Lurian cosmogonic dynamics (*shevirat ha-kelim* [breaking of the vessels], *tzimtzum* [contraction] and *tiqqun* [restoration]) can in fact be read and interpreted within a linguistic frame. The interpreters of Yizchak Luria, especially Mosheh Chayim Luzzatto, further develop Lurian theosophy by accentuating its linguistic component. In the kabbalistic *imago mundi*, the word of God revealed in the Hebrew language is a preliminary condition not only for human thought and action but, from a historical and cosmological perspective, for creation itself, along the lines of a universal hermeneutic built on a divine *Ursprache*. The *qabbalah* therefore distinguishes a mythical, suprahistorical, original and uncorrupted language – the language spoken by God to Adam – and, one step below, biblical Hebrew, a residue of the primordial language and an attenuated reflection of that first, unreproducible expression, but first among historical languages to approximate the perfection of pure language. The status assigned to Hebrew is bolstered in the 15th and 16th centuries and the Christian *qabbalah* – from Johannes Reuchlin to Christian Knorr von Rosenroth – continues to reflect extensively on the Adamic language and on its absolute rank of transparency and purity which Hebrew comes closest to than any other human language. The same concepts, especially in relation to Hebrew as a 'pure language' (*reine Sprache*), are resumed during the 19th century, feeding into the philosophy and aesthetics of early German Romanticism and idealism, especially from Franz Xaver von Baader and Franz Joseph Molitor whose interests focus on theosophy, Christian mysticism and Jewish Kabbalah in an attempt to connect Christianity with *qabbalah* while striving for a higher form of knowledge and greater harmony resulting from this synthesis. In addition to the discussions and intellectual exchange with his friend

logical-rational discursiveness, with instrumentality, the vehicularity of language and, in an even more radical manner, with signification. In short, pure and authentic language has nothing to do with the mediation of content and communicative intention.

As regards the transformative and metamorphic capacity that translation - if understood correctly - can bring to bear, Benjamin completes his whole discourse five years later in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, which explores the concept to its outermost boundaries in a perspective that is no longer only intralinguistic but also interlinguistic, and where the metamorphic value of translation, its insertion into a messianic dynamic aimed at anticipation and redemptive approximation, has clearly been brought into focus. In 1923, Benjamin prefaces the German version of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* with an introduction entitled *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* (The Task of the Translator), which he had written two years earlier and which shows, more clearly than ever, the convergence of Romantic thinking on language and Kabbalistic thinking.

### 3 The Task of the Translator

As early as 1916, in *Über die Sprache*, Benjamin's writing begins to show an embryonic discourse which, among its core ideas, includes the withdrawal of the rational sequence, the disconnection from the logical link, the decline of syntax. And as early as 1916, in a consequential manner, Benjamin had focused on the concept of translation. Based on the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt - an anthology of whose works he had planned but never fulfilled - Benjamin, too, develops the notion - kabbalistic from a Hebrew stance, proto-Romantic and Romantic from a German stance - of *Ursprache*, the original, superindividual and meta-historical language, of which the translation - if understood correctly - can attempt to recapture a glimmer. In his essay on translation *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, the term *Ursprache* does not appear: here Benjamin writes extensively about the *reine Sprache*, 'pure language' though he always intends it as the name-language and Adamic language, where words and things are co-essential, which he had already dealt with five years earlier. In *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* - an essay critics have equally devoted much attention to <sup>22</sup> - Benjamin claims that:

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Scholem, Molitor's *Philosophie der Geschichte oder über die Tradition* is the source from which Benjamin draws his notions on Jewish tradition, theology and mysticism, and the mould from which the concept of *reine Sprache* originates. See also Grözinger, Dan 1995; Kilcher 1998; Goodman-Thau, Mattenklott, Schulte 1999; Mertens 2001.

<sup>22</sup> Drumbl 2003; Bartoloni 2007; D'Urso, Muzzioli 2011; Abel 2014; Costa 2014; Ponzi 2014.

Vielmehr beruht alle überhistorische Verwandtschaft der Sprachen darin, daß in ihrer jeder als ganzer jeweils eines und zwar dasselbe gemeint ist, das dennoch keiner einzelnen von ihnen, sondern nur der Allheit ihrer einander ergänzenden Intentionen erreichbar ist: die reine Sprache. (Benjamin 1972, 13)<sup>23</sup>

Translation - connecting languages despite their fundamental and radical extraneousness - is, according to Benjamin, an attempt to approach the pure and primeval language. An attempt at harmonizing and repairing the linguistic fracture, where the messianic glimmer is in full view. An attempt that only a literal translation, not a free one, can bring about, and where the most distinctive trait is the transition - as far as it is possible - of the morphological, syntactic and lexical features of the foreign language into the target text, while triggering metamorphic processes in the target language.<sup>24</sup> In order to adapt to a foreign linguistic form, to receive it within itself, the target language inevitably has to twist its own structures and stretch until it becomes virtually disfigured. It is therefore quite clear that every language is left with "ein Letztes, Entscheidendes" (Benjamin 1972, 19).<sup>25</sup> At the bottom of every language lies something that cannot be transmitted through words. This is the ultimate essence, the core of pure language. A hidden and fragmented nucleus forced into the meshes of individual languages, which only translation can release by moving between them:

**23** "Rather, all suprahistorical kinship between languages consists in this: in every one of them as a whole, one and the same thing is meant. Yet this one thing is achievable not by any single language but only by the totality of their intentions supplementing one another: the pure language" (Benjamin 1996b, 257).

**24** An analogous idea of translation, to be realized through the absolute and literal rendering of the original, so as to change the connotations of the resulting language, is put forward, three years after the composition of *Die Aufgabe*, by Franz Rosenzweig in the afterword to the German translation of the poetic corpus of Yehudah ha-Levi (Rosenzweig 1924, then 1984, 81-100, It. trans. by G. Bonola, Rosenzweig 1991, 143-63) and subsequently in the translation of the Hebrew Bible, carried out with Martin Buber from 1925 to 1929. Embedded in the Rosenzweigian idea is Romantic hermeneutics, primarily the particular slant Friedrich Schleiermacher gives to the concept of translation in his famous speech given in 1813 at the Königliche Akademie der Wissenschaften in Berlin, from which Rosenzweig will draw the conceptual bifurcation between the practice of *Dolmetschen* and that of the real *Uebersetzen*. See Schleiermacher 1838, 207-45 and Askani 1997, 114-24. On translation, a few decades after Benjamin and Rosenzweig, Heidegger himself formulates a number of common ideas, especially on translation viewed as *über-setzen*, "to bring to the other side", while infusing the spirit of the source language into the target language. Just as Rosenzweig had criticized Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf's translation of the Greek tragedy, in his tendency to simplify and modernize, Heidegger criticizes Hermann Diels' translation of pre-Socratic philosophers.

**25** "Some ultimate, decisive element" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

Die reine Sprache gestaltet der Sprachbewegung zurückzugewinnen, ist das gewaltige und einzige Vermögen der Übersetzung [...] Jene reine Sprache, die in fremde gebannt ist, in der eigenen zu erlösen, die im Werk gefangene in der Umdichtung zu befreien, ist die Aufgabe des Übersetzers. (Benjamin 1972, 19)<sup>26</sup>

The mission of translating and the task of the translator are therefore aimed at helping develop the extent of incomprehensibility, inexpressiveness or absence of meaning in the target language, which are the hallmark of pure language and which are contained in the source language – the 'other' and 'foreign' language by definition – which must be wholly transferred into the target language. Authentic translation – Benjamin argues – is therefore transparent, but not in the sense of linearity, comprehensibility and clarity of structures. Indeed, it is more opaque than crystal clear. Its transparency is rather an attempt not to cover the original, not to cast a shadow on it, thus allowing the light of the pure language to fall on the target language, or at least some of its oblique rays or sparkles. In this sense, translation must be 'extreme' and as literal as possible and must not come to compromises, adaptations, adjustments to merely facilitate understanding.

In the same breath, Benjamin proposes a literalism that can measure how translation, in the name of pure language, can effectively break the target language apart, while removing its constraints and extending its boundaries so as to create that necessary alteration and dissonance that helps the germ of pure language grow in translation ("In der Übersetzung den Samen reiner Sprache zur Reife zu bringen", Benjamin 1972, 17),<sup>27</sup> thus bringing harmony into being, "die große Sehnsucht nach Sprachergänzung" (Benjamin 1972, 18).<sup>28</sup> Translation certainly cannot reveal the secret relationship of original interlinguistic communion. However, it can represent it as "keimhaft oder intensiv" (Benjamin 1972, 12).<sup>29</sup> Benjamin encapsulates the embryonic linguistic commonality and the convergence of the multiple into one primordial language into the adverb *keimhaft*, ('embryonically' or 'in embryo'), where the messianic component is clear. The sprout – the main metaphor for offspring and for generation, the figure of utmost concentration, absolute density and maxi-

<sup>26</sup> "To regain pure language fully formed from the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation [...] It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is exiled among alien tongues, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

<sup>27</sup> "Ripening the seed of pure language in a translation" (Benjamin 1996b, 259).

<sup>28</sup> "The great longing for linguistic complementation" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

<sup>29</sup> "In *embryonic* or *intensive* form" (Benjamin 1996b, 255).

num potential for the future – has always been, ever since the prophecies of the coming of the Messiah from the Davidic line,<sup>30</sup> perhaps the most powerful image of the messianic dynamic. In the redemptive syntax, the adjective thus indicates the germinal moment, the element in formation, the prelude to an ultimate fulfilment, harmony *in statu nascendi*. A little further on (1972, 12), Benjamin also uses the term *Keim* ('germ', 'sprout', 'embryo') to indicate the hint of harmony that translation can foster when it tries to represent, without being able to produce it from scratch, the intimate and secret relationship between languages. In translation, therefore, according to Benjamin, the attempt to repair the linguistic fracture and to heal the post-Babel wound, while restoring the Edenic covenant is clearly evident. Interpreted as such, translation is therefore carried out in an intensive, allusive and anticipatory manner:<sup>31</sup> the concept of anticipation of redemption in the now (*Vorwegnahme*)<sup>32</sup> is, in turn, a recurring idea in messianic discourse and the intensive bond formed between language and language by translation, can bridge the lin-

**30** *Isaiah* 11,1: "A shoot will grow out of Jesse's root stock, a bud will sprout from his roots".

**31** "Eine intensive, d.h. vorgreifende, andeutende Verwirklichung", (Benjamin 1972, 12); "intensive – that is, anticipative, intimating –realization" (Benjamin 1996b, 255).

**32** In Rosenzweig, for example, the category of 'anticipation' (*Vorwegnahme*) is central in the formulation of the time-eternity link. While waiting for the fulfilment of time, man can anticipate tomorrow in today, eternity in the present. The concept of *Vorwegnahme* – which occurs for the first time in the essay *Von Einheit und Ewigkeit. Ein Gespräch zwischen Leib und Seele* (Of unity and eternity. A conversation between body and soul, Rosenzweig 1986, 65-78, then Rosenzweig 2002, It. trans. by Ciglia, Rosenzweig 1998, 923-40) and which is subsequently presented in *The Star of Redemption* – contemplates that the advent of the Messianic Kingdom can, indeed must, be anticipated. The future must be anticipated in the present, the Messiah must be made to come ahead of time ("das Herbeiführenwollen des Messias vor seiner Zeit", Rosenzweig 1988, 253; "the bringing of the Messiah before his time" It. trans. by Bonola, Rosenzweig 1985, 244). Similar to the temporal categories of messianic anticipation is the Pauline Christian idea of a condensation of time or its contraction (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος, "the time has been shortened", 1 Cor 7:29) together with the passing of the form or figure of this world (παράγει γὰρ τὸ σχῆμα τοῦ κόσμου τούτου, "for the present form of the world is passing away", 1 Cor 7:31), especially as the end of time approaches. The matrix text, which is very productive for Benjamin, stems from a few Pauline verses from the *First Letter to the Corinthians* (1 Cor 7: 29-32), where the messianic life – marked by an indistinction in which every concept is simultaneously also its opposite – is contained in the formula 'as (if) not' (ὡς μὴ), a device which, according to the interpretation of Jacob Taubes (Taubes 1993, It. trans. by Dal Santo, Taubes 1997) falls directly on Benjamin's *Theologisch-politisches Fragment* (Theological-political fragment) (Benjamin 1977c, 203-4; It. trans by Agamben, Benjamin 2008) filtered by the *als ob nicht* of Heidegger's lectures on the phenomenology of religion (Heidegger 1995, It. trans. by Guri-satti 2003, 160). From the Pauline passage Benjamin draws the idea of passing (*Vergehen*), of an eternal sunset – the zone of indistinction *par excellence* – and of the transience of the worldly realm characterized by a continuous approximation and a constant approach to the messianic domain. See Stimilli 2004; Azzariti-Fumaroli 2015, 102-3; Stefanini 2018, 115-32; Guerra, Tagliacozzo 2019.

guistic difference, while retracing the path towards the original, now lost, linguistic unity. Brushing up against pure language – "die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt", which is "ausdrucksloses Wort"<sup>33</sup> – ideas that Benjamin had already used in 1916 to define Adamic language – ideal translation, i.e., totally literal, extinguishes the linearity of the content and eliminates any communicative intention. Hence, the less translation aims at communication, the more value and dignity it gains. In fact, if understood as a redemptive tool and a means to universal understanding, as an anticipation of the messianic time, it must be – quite paradoxically – against communication and it must rid itself of "schwerer und fremder Sinn" (Benjamin 1972, 12).<sup>34</sup> The ideal translation, therefore, has zero degree of communication and a very high degree of harmony and messianic reconstitution by anticipating redemption. Deprived of meaning – this is the extreme implication – language inevitably proceeds towards its annihilation, though, in this way, it can perhaps reunite the fragments scattered under the tower of Babel and head, once again, towards the compact inexpressiveness and unintentionality of the Adamic language, bringing back messianically – again by the linguistic act of conjunction that underlies translation – the linguistic multiple to the essence of linguistic singularity.<sup>35</sup> In this union of languages, in the passage

**33** "In dieser reinen Sprache, die nichts mehr meint und nichts mehr ausdrückt, sondern als ausdrucksloses und schöpferisches Wort das in allen Sprachen Gemeinte ist, trifft endlich alle Mitteilung, aller Sinn und alle Intention auf eine Schicht, in der sie zu *erlöschen* bestimmt sind" (Benjamin 1972, 19); "In this pure language – which no longer means or expresses anything but is, as expressionless and creative word, that which is meant in all languages – all information, all sense, and all intention finally encounter a stratum in which they are destined to be *extinguished*" (Benjamin 1996b, 261; italics added).

**34** "Heavy, alien meaning" (Benjamin 1996b, 261).

**35** After mentioning, in *Über Sprache überhaupt*, the construction of the tower of Babel, its destruction and the consequent *confusio linguarum*, the Benjaminian argument, in *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, proceeds contiguously with the cosmic drama of the breaking of the vessels, with clear references to the Kabbalistic figures of the *tzimtzum* (contraction), of the breaking of the vessels (*shevirat ha-kelim*) and of the consequent restoration (*tiqqun ha-olam*). For a discussion of these figures, typical of Yizchak Luria's *qabbalah*, see Busi 1999, 390-7, 445-52; Idel 2004; Idel 2010. Through the mimetic approach and the mirroring of the source language in the target language, the authentic translation tends to obliterate interlingual diversity, allowing a glimpse of the pre-Babel language and contributing, metonymically, to the *restitutio ad integrum*, i.e., the realignment of the primordial fracture: "Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muß, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes, als Bruchstück einer größeren Sprache erkennbar zu machen. Eben darum muß sie von der Absicht, etwas mitzuteilen, vom Sinn in sehr hohem Maße absehen und das Original ist ihr in diesem nur insofern wesentlich, als es der Mühe und Ordnung des Mitzuteilenden den Übersetzer und sein Werk schon enthoben hat" (Benjamin



of one into the other, there is therefore no idea of order, of syntax, of transparent linearity. Rather, the image of a productive disorder, of an asyntactic chaos prevails once again. Indeed, by connecting languages while retracing the lost, primordial unity, translation – acting as a forerunner to redemption – goes through a disconnection of the logical and causal link and – as part of the redemptive dynamic – it triggers germinative and metamorphic-transformative processes in the target language. Until the "messianisches Ende"<sup>36</sup> of linguistic evolution is reached, the redemption of meaning through the har-

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1972, 18); "Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. For this very reason translation must in large measure refrain from wanting to communicate something, from rendering the sense, and in this the original is important to it only insofar as it has already relieved the translator and his translation of the effort of assembling and expressing what is to be conveyed" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

**36** "Bei den einzelnen, den unergänzten Sprachen nämlich ist ihr Gemeintes niemals in relativer Selbständigkeit anzutreffen, wie bei den einzelnen Wörtern oder Sätzen, sondern vielmehr in stetem Wandel begriffen, bis es aus der Harmonie all jener Arten des Meinens als die reine Sprache herauszutreten vermag. So lange bleibt es in den Sprachen verborgen. Wenn aber diese derart bis ans messianische Ende ihrer Geschichte wachsen, so ist es die Übersetzung, welche am ewigen Fortleben der Werke und am unendlichen Aufleben der Sprachen sich entzündet, immer von neuem die Probe auf jenes heilige Wachstum der Sprachen zu machen: wie weit ihr Verborgenes von der Offenbarung entfernt sei, wie gegenwärtig es im Wissen um diese Entfernung werden mag" (Benjamin 1972, 14); "In the individual, unsupplemented languages, what is meant is never found in relative independence, as in individual words or sentences; rather, it is in a constant state of flux – until it is able to emerge as the pure language from the harmony of all the various ways of meaning. If, however, these languages continue to grow in this way until the messianic end of their history, it is translation that catches fire from the eternal life of the works and the perpetually renewed life of language; for it is translation that keeps putting the hallowed growth of languages to the test: How far removed is their hidden meaning from revelation? How close can it be brought by the knowledge of this remoteness?" (Benjamin 1996b, 257). While talking about faithfulness to the syntax of the original text which must inevitably lead to an upset of meaning as it borders on unintelligibility, Benjamin argues that the communicative intention, therefore the meaning, should not be preserved but 'restored' on the basis of hidden and fundamental relationships. To illustrate this method, Benjamin uses the image of the realignment of the fragments, and the reunion of scattered splinters – a simile that, with analogous clarity, leads back to the tripartite dynamics of the Lurian *qabbalah* (contraction of divine energy – breaking of the vessels containing the light of God and consequent serious alteration of the cosmic balance and restoration-reintegration anticipated in the present but accomplished only in the fullness of time with the arrival of the Messiah). The realignment of the fragments, when anticipated by translation, must not proceed on the basis of relations of analogy or similarity between languages but according to the reproduction of the 'way of understanding' (*Art des Meinens*) that underlies the source language. The concept of *Art des Meinens* coincides, albeit partially, with that of 'signifier'; in addition to the acoustic image of the word, it includes the phrasal-syntactic structure of the source-language and its reproduction in the target language, the only process whereby traces of pure language may be glimpsed. One must therefore follow the edges and the sutures of the shards, the marginal lines of

mony of signifiers remains hidden, but in the present, it can be anticipated through translation which, thanks to its interlingual movement, creates a reflection of the *reine Sprache*, of which translation is the closest approximation. True translation is therefore a synthetic and metamorphic act, the creation of something totally new and, at first, foreign. A renewal by transformation which subverts categories by preparing or messianically anticipating new categories of meaning, where the disintegration of pre-existing configurations, the sudden burst of what is new and unconditioned, the categorical inversion,<sup>37</sup> the overturning of sensible experience and the coexist-

the fragments with the implicit, consequent creation of an equally fragmentary, sharp and terse language, tending towards implosion or explosion.

**37** The messianic inversion (*messianische Umkehr*), with its technical and rhetorical use of the paradox, is one of the categories most used by Benjamin to envisage the dawn of a new time or its preparation, even beyond these early writings up to *Über den Begriff der Geschichte* (Thesis on the concept of history). On the concept of 'messianic inversion' in Benjamin and on the Pauline framework underlying this idea, as well as on the demise of the communicative and informative role of language (*katárgēsis*), see the seminal study by Giorgio Agamben (Agamben 2000; Agamben 2007). Agamben points out (Agamben 2000, 74) that a Scholemian thesis, the eighty-third out of the ninety-five theses published in 1918 that Scholem himself wished to give to Benjamin as a present for his twenty-sixth birthday, reads: "Die Zeit des waw ha-hippukh ist die messianische Zeit", Scholem 1995, 295; "Messianic time is the time of the inversive waw", Author's transl.), where the reference is to the use, very frequent in biblical Hebrew, of prefixing a waw to a verbal form to reverse its temporal value from completed (past) to unfinished (future), and vice versa. It is hardly necessary to recall then how the figures of upheaval, of metamorphosis, of the reversal from negative to positive (*Umkehr*; *Umwandlung*, *Umschlag*), originating in the early Romanticism (Friedrich Schlegel widely uses the term *Umschlag*), are central to the discourses of cultural renewal, to the Jewish Renaissance between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries to describe the breaking through of new times, with a very clear messianic component. See, in this regard, Buber's writings of the 1900s and 1910s, especially the first three *Reden über das Judentum* (Talks on Judaism). See Buber 2007, 219-56, It. trans. by Lavagetto, Buber 2013, 110-53. The time near the end, which draws shorter or contracts in the Pauline passage 1Cor 7,29 (ὁ καιρὸς συνεσταλμένος) transforming and blurring the categories of the mundane, is sometimes rendered with the concept of 'turning point' ("time experienced a turning point"), where the messianic moment and the categorical inversion become even more evident. Another term used by the Messianic lexicon to express the breaking through of the new, the radical change and the 'rotating' and inversive dynamic is *Wende* 'turning point', which occurs for example in Rosenzweig, in an essay from 1929 that accompanies and illustrates the translation of the Bible, indicating the approximation to the eternity of the Kingdom in the present ("Die Sehnsucht nach seiner Ewigkeit vergeht dem Menschen, der Gottes Gegenwärtig werden in dieser Weltzeit erfährt und erhofft. Selbst das Wort der Bibel, das gewöhnlich mit Ewigkeit übersetzt wird, bedeutet in Wahrheit ja eben diese unsere Weltzeit bis zu ihrer Wende, bis zu 'jenem Tag'"). "The longing for God's eternity is lost on the person who experiences and hopes for God's presence in this world time. Even the Biblical word that is usually translated 'eternity' truly means our world time until its *turning point*, until 'that day'", Author's transl., Rosenzweig 1984b, 50; italics added). Heidegger himself, in *Phänomenologie des religiösen Lebens*, had used the same terms in a 'conversive' sense: "Der Ausgangspunkt des Wegs zur Philosophie ist die faktische Lebenserfahrung. Aber es scheint, als ob die Philosophie aus der faktischen Lebenserfahrung wieder herausführt. In der Tat führt jener Weg gewissermaßen nur vor die Philosophie, nicht bis zu ihr hin. Die Philoso-

ence of opposites,<sup>38</sup> the palingenetic moment, the stump-sprout isotopy - have always been part of the messianic dynamic.

#### 4 Language Reversal and Silence

As an inherent necessity and theoretical outcome of translation, Benjamin therefore describes an unusual language which, through the authentic interlingual connection, subverts order and syntax, succeeding in affirming itself on the margins of silence and thus extinguishing the word. In light of this, the most faithful translation is the one that upsets meaning, brushing against pure language and expediting redemption, leading however, "geradenwegs ins Unverständliche" (Benjamin 1972, 17)<sup>39</sup> and to its own annihilation. Therefore, translation would represent - by semantic extension - the messianic language reversal,<sup>40</sup> a sudden and unexpected upheaval of syntactic and semantic categories. Redemption entails the extinction of meaning,<sup>41</sup> which is both a necessity and a risk. In Benjamin's idea of language, in which Adorno sees an 'anticommunicative moment', which 'knows no restraints' (Adorno 1990, 46), the conjunctive idea that underlies translation is developed to the extent that it uncouples any logical links and reaches the edges of the realm of silence or even trespasses them.

Benjamin's discourse thus goes through a *Spannung*, in constant approximation to that *Entspannung*, the dissolution of the tension

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phie selbst ist nur durch eine Umwendung jenes Weges zu erreichen; aber nicht durch eine einfache *Umwendung*, so daß das Erkennen dadurch lediglich auf andere Gegenstände gerichtet würde; sondern, radikaler, durch eine *eigentliche Umwandlung*" (Heidegger 1995, 10; italics added); "The starting point of the path to philosophy is the factual experience of life. But it seems as if philosophy leads out of the factual experience of life again. In fact, that path only leads, as it were, in front of philosophy, not all the way to it. Philosophy itself can only be reached through a reversal (*Umwendung*), but not through a simple turning which would orient cognition merely toward different objects but, more radically, through an authentic transformation/conversion (*Umwandlung*)", Author's transl. On Benjamin's messianic inversion, see Rose 2014, 278-91. See also Dubbels 2011, 133-41 and Khatib 2013.

**38** *Isaiah* 11, 6-8: "The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them | and the cow and the bear shall feed; their young ones shall lie down together: and the lion shall eat straw like the ox | and the sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den".

**39** "Directly to incomprehensibility" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

**40** This idea is also expressed in Rose 2014.

**41** By going back to the verb *erlöschen* ('to extinguish', 'to put out'), used by Benjamin in *Die Aufgabe* to describe the language of translation, we could therefore claim that, in this messianic articulation carried out linguistically, the *Erlösung* ('redemption') implies an *Erlöschung* ('demise', 'extinction').

that is inherent to the redemptive moment.

The language that Benjamin envisages as the result of translation can therefore be a salvific albeit insidious gift since, in order to anticipate redemption, it must become harsh, almost impassable, indistinguishable and incomprehensible. According to Benjamin, this path that leads to language nonsense can be exemplified by Hölderlin's late translations - a shining example of harmony of the harsh, where language is farthest from meaning and closest to music, "wie eine Äolsharfe vom Winde [...] berührt" (Benjamin 1972, 21)<sup>42</sup> - and particularly Sophocles', "monströse Beispiele solcher Wörtlichkeit" (Benjamin 1972, 17),<sup>43</sup> where meaning evanesces as literalism emerges. But in the relinquishment of meaning there is a further implication: "Die Sophokles-Übersetzungen", Benjamin continues

waren Hölderlins letztes Werk. In ihnen stürzt der Sinn von Abgrund zu Abgrund, bis er droht in bodenlosen Sprachtiefen sich zu verlieren. (Benjamin 1972, 17)<sup>44</sup>

As pure literalism and encroachment, devoid of communication and devoid of meaning, translation inevitably proceeds towards total unintelligibility. Towards its shutdown and its own annihilation. As it travels through these spaces, it runs

Die ungeheure und ursprüngliche Gefahr aller Übersetzung: daß die Tore einer so erweiterten Sprache zufallen und den Übersetzer ins Schweigen schließen. (Benjamin 1972, 17)<sup>45</sup>

Language in Benjamin would therefore be the happy and luminous redemptive utopia of being set free from the burden of meaning, of being emancipated from instrumental communication or - to echo his words - from the "bürgerliche Auffassung der Sprache" (Benjamin 1977, 414).<sup>46</sup> Were it not an extremely fragile condition, always teetering on the brink of cracks and alterations: the withdrawal of language, the retraction of language within itself,<sup>47</sup> the retroversion

<sup>42</sup> "The way an aeolian harp is touched by the wind" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

<sup>43</sup> "Monstrous examples of such literalness" (Benjamin 1996b, 260).

<sup>44</sup> "Holderlin's translations from Sophocles were his last work; in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

<sup>45</sup> "The enormous danger inherent in all translations: the gates of a language thus expanded and modified may slam shut and enclose the translator in silence" (Benjamin 1996b, 262).

<sup>46</sup> "The bourgeois conception of language" (Benjamin 1996, 65).

<sup>47</sup> In the aforementioned fragment *Zum Thema Einzelwissenschaft und Philosophie*, Benjamin - tracing an alternative route to bourgeois communication, governed by a

and contraction of the language until it becomes totally extinct – almost a renewed *tsimtsum* of speech – show, beyond the light of a new utterance, a dark implication, an unexpected fold, where the danger of silence, of the demise of words – which have now become useless and refractory – looms ahead. The *qabbalah* is well aware of this, which, as we have said, addresses the problem of language in all its facets, and which, in the words of George Steiner in *After Babel*, “knows of a day of redemption on which translation will no longer be necessary” (Steiner 1975, 499). However, the same *qabbalah* also envisages a more hidden and esoteric possibility, suggesting the hypothesis of a rebellion of language against man, who loses his grip on it and slips into silence and aphasia or follows the path, both delusional and charismatic, of confused and disjointed speech across the wide spectrum stretching from polyglot and xenoglossia to glossolalia and glossopoesis,<sup>48</sup> but devoid of any Pentecostal bliss and without even contemplating the consolation of mystical silence derived from the perfect union with the divine and from the contemplation of transcendence. The abrupt demise of language will decree the end of any possibility of understanding, making translation impossible, even inconceivable. Free from the bondage of meaning – these were, after all, the ongoing tension and the messianic glimmer of the Benjaminian model of language and translation – words will be both wonderful and inert, wrapped up in themselves, “they will ‘become only themselves, and as dead stones in our mouths’” (Steiner 1975, 499). A grave danger for those who, like Benjamin, understand language and translation in such an extreme way, but, as Hölderlin writes at the beginning of his late poem *Patmos*<sup>49</sup> – outlining, by means of a fading language, always on the verge of becoming extinct, a hermeneutics of history with a vanishing point, far from reconciled and harmonious, on a redemption *e negativo* – “wo [...] Gefahr ist, wächst | das Rettende auch” (Hölderlin 1970, 340).<sup>50</sup>

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principle of syntactic causality, and postulating, in its place, a retreat of logical discursiveness – speaks of “ein[...] bestimmte[s] [...] Insichgehen der Sache selbst” (Benjamin 1985, 51); “a certain going into itself of the thing”, Author’s transl.

**48** On glossolalia, see Lipparini 2012.

**49** Particularly in his later years, Hölderlin, master of the *harte Fügung* (harsh construct), stands at the head of that poetic line where discursiveness withdraws, where language becomes spare and at times inextricable, proceeding through hyperbatons, leaping and eliding connections, with a rhapsodic and syncopated alternation between flashes of inspiration and lyrical illuminations, fragments and poetic torsos, statements of a gnomic, sententious or paradoxical nature, as the metric structures explode and break into splinters, fragments and atoms of meaning. A line which, if it were to be chased to its outermost limits, leads straight to Paul Celan, who clearly has a close kinship with Hölderlin and Benjamin.

**50** “But where danger is, there grows | as well that which saves”, Author’s transl.

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