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Between *pain* and *Brot*: The Untranslatable in Walter Benjamin's

Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers

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INTRODUCTION

On the internet, there are many lists of words that are ‘untranslatable,’ which are quite often immediately followed by a translation of the supposedly untranslatable word. These words are untranslatable in the sense that there is no direct equivalent in the language of the article, but this does not necessarily make these words untranslatable. In practice, the thing that makes something untranslatable is the fact the language that it is translated towards is very close to capturing the meaning of the original but it never properly fits. In his 1923 text *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Walter Benjamin tries to formulate a method of translation which focuses on the gap between the original and the translation, i.e. the untranslatable. He argues that in this gap there is a sign of a higher language that he calls ‘pure language’ which would be the messianic end of all languages. The philosopher’s language, as this language would make it possible to express anything to the minutest detail. In this paper, I will argue that Benjamin’s concept of the untranslatable can help in creating a new perspective on translation that celebrates translation and therefore moves away from the popular attitude towards translation which poses that the translation is inherently inferior to the original. In the first chapter, I will try to define what Benjamin means by ‘pure language’. To do this, I will first explain what this popular attitude towards translation is, which I will call the ‘mimetic’ view of translation, and why it is problematic. I will do this by describing Nietzsche’s critique of translation, where he states that translation is bound to fail as an essential part of the text is embedded in the language of the original. Benjamin agrees with the claim that the core of the original is bound to the language that it is written in, but this is exactly the part that he is looking to uncover, the untranslatable element of the text, as he believes that this is where pure

language can be found. The concept of pure language verges on the mystical, as Benjamin describes it as simultaneously full and empty of meaning, expressing and expressionless. To further explain Benjamin, I will turn to two deconstructionist philosophers, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. Derrida explores the theological aspect of pure language, as he links Benjamin's text to the story of the tower of Babel, and analyses what it means for a text to be translated, especially if this text has divine qualities such as scripture. De Man, on the other hand, goes against the messianic reading of Benjamin as he claims (based on a mistranslation) that pure language is not the end of all languages, but a way to express the suffering of one's own language as the act of translation exposes that a language which is supposed to feel familiar to us, cannot express what we want from it. In the second chapter, I will expose some of the issues that arise from both Benjamin's and De Man's conceptions of pure language. If pure language exists, as Benjamin claims, this would mean that it would be an actual quality in languages that would predetermine the translatability of a text. I will argue that this is not the case, as other aspects factor into the translator's experience of translatability, such as the beliefs they hold. Additionally, it is not clear in what way translation influences the development of pure language, which makes it difficult to justify Benjamin's method of translation, as it foregoes sense for a literal word-for-word translation which would make it nearly impossible to read. While De Man's version of pure language offers a way to think about Benjamin's theory in a non-theological way, I will argue that it is problematic as it essentially returns translation to the mimetic view. Therefore, in the third chapter, I will return to Benjamin's critique of mimetic translation, as he explains that this view imposes a static essence on the original by imagining that there is an 'objective' way to read and therefore translate the text. I will argue that while the messianic concept of pure language cannot hold, Benjamin nevertheless offers us an

alternative way to look at translation by celebrating the difference that translation brings. A more liberal concept of translation, which would include translations into music, film, or any other art form, shows that there are already ways to talk about translation which do not diminish it on the basis that it is not a perfect imitation of the original. Furthermore, there is also the possibility to translate within one language, as De Man claims that all interpretations of *Die Aufgabe* are a translation of Benjamin's thoughts into the interpreters' words. This shows that even within the same language, there exists something untranslatable, which in one way means that it is impossible to truly talk about the same thing, but it also means that it is possible to understand these differences exist and therefore learn from them.

Translation is an essential part of philosophy, but it is rarely discussed. If it does come up, it is usually concerning the poor quality of a translation or the untranslatability of a particular term. Reading a translation is sometimes framed as an academic weakness, as the translation cannot capture the full essence of the original. The message is that the translation should only be read when there is no alternative. However, philosophy is a multilingual affair and the claim that a translation is inherently inferior places the original on an epistemological pedestal which in reality cannot hold. As I was working on this paper, I read interpretations of *Die Aufgabe* which were written in English, French, German and Italian. While all of these interpretations are different, I do not believe that this relates to whether or not the interpreter in question had direct access to the original language. In fact, it is De Man, who spends a large part of his interpretation comparing and critiquing the French translation by Maurice de Gandillac and the English translation by Harry Zohn, who makes the most prominent misinterpretation, whilst he had access to the text in the original language. This mistranslation cannot be considered a complete failure, as it demonstrates

that the imperfection of a translation can also create new ideas. One of the problems regarding philosophy and translation is that philosophers expect the translation to be invisible, which could be counterproductive as it imposes a false sense of familiarity on the original. A visible translation, one that displays the quirks of the original language, forces the reader to grapple with the fact that in some way, the thoughts of the original are shaped by the language that it is written in and that by understanding how the translation and the original are different, it becomes possible to have a better grip on the text. I therefore do not want to claim that the translation can replace the original, but that the framing of translation as inherently inferior overemphasizes the possibility of a 'true' understanding contained in the original.

There is a lot that has been said about *Die Aufgabe*, in both philosophical, literary, and translation studies spheres. De Man introduces his interpretation by saying that 'you are nobody unless you have said something about this text' (1986, 73). It is a very dense text, which means that there are many ways to harvest ideas from just this text alone. There are of course other perspectives (as Antione Berman claims that one ought to have 'read all of Benjamin's writings before attempting any interpretation of "The Task of the Translator"' (2018, 30)), but I have limited myself to this particular text by Benjamin. I think that this can be defended on the basis that in *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin appears to have little regard for the author's intent when it comes to translating, as the most important part is to expose the difference between languages. While other texts of Benjamin touch upon some of the topics he discusses in *Die Aufgabe*, this would lead to an analysis which is more concerned with Benjamin's intentions than the text's intention. In this paper, I am trying to create an interpretation of the untranslatable as put forward by Benjamin in *Die Aufgabe*,

but I do not think this interpretation would necessarily be more fruitful by trying to reconstruct all of Benjamin's thoughts about translation and languages.

Before moving on to the main part of this paper, I would like to make some clarifications about the translation used. In my analysis, I use Steven Rendall's English translation, entitled 'The Translator's Task,' originally from 1997. There is an earlier, more popular English translation by Harry Zohn which De Man references. De Man and Derrida also use the French translation by Maurice de Gandillac, and as I will note when discussing Derrida, his translator (Joseph F. Graham) chose to translate the quotations from *Die Aufgabe* from the French, rather than reference an already existing English translation of Benjamin's text. This means that in some cases there is a kind of 'translation triangle,' as is the case of the German 'Königsmantel:' in English, it translates into 'royal mantle' and into French as 'manteau royal,' which was then translated into English as 'royal cape.' In the spirit of difference, I have not tried to create a uniformity of these kinds of terms, but use the same version as whatever text is most relevant at that point.

Additionally, I have tried to minimise the amount of foreign words used throughout the text, as I feel like it would be contradicting my thesis if I tried to avoid the translation of particular terms due to the impossibility of a 'perfect' translation.

CHAPTER I: WHAT IS PURE LANGUAGE?

Benjamin's concept of 'pure language' is a rather unique way of looking at translation. Therefore, before I try to define it, I want to introduce the concept of what is generally considered 'untranslatable' through a critique of translation by Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued that the mimetic view of translation, the idea that translation aims to repeat what the original says in a different language, will inevitably fail. This view of translation poses the original as inherently superior to the translation, which can only be derivative and can never fully encompass what the original says. Undeniably, there are aspects of the original that are bound to the language that they are written in, and cannot be separated and replicated in translation. This raises the problem that certain concepts could be exclusive to the language that they are written in, as Martin Heidegger essentially claimed when he said that German and Ancient Greek are the only languages suitable for philosophy. Walter Benjamin, who in his essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* proposes a different view of translation, one based on the kinship and differences between languages, where the untranslatable is not a problem but a source of knowledge. This chapter will aim to describe Benjamin's concept of pure language, a messianic language which supposedly inheres in all languages and could be the key to expressing oneself without the restrictions imposed by common languages. According to Benjamin, pure language can be exposed through translation, but it cannot be accessed directly as it manifests itself as the untranslatable. The untranslatable would therefore be sign of the possibility that languages could grow closer, and eventually bloom into pure language. Next, I will present two major deconstructionist interpretations of Benjamin's texts

to further elucidate the potentialities of pure language, and how pure language relates to the concept of the untranslatable. The first interpretation is from Jacques Derrida, who explores the theological elements of the text as he links it to the story of the Tower of Babel, and what the implications are if pure language would be the messianic end of languages, as Benjamin proposes. He analyses what it means to read a text about translation in translation, and more specifically, how to understand the relationship between the content of the text, the original language, and the translation and what the implications are for this in regards to scripture. The second interpretation is from Paul de Man, who discussed the text in a transcribed lecture. De Man wants to move away from the common messianic interpretation of Benjamin, and does so by proposing a different perspective on pure language through an accidental mistranslation. Nevertheless, De Man's reading of *Die Aufgabe*, which proposes that the thesis of the text is that pure language symbolises the suffering of one's own language, offers a way to understand Benjamin's theory from a non-theological perspective. Additionally, De Man points out the inherent untranslatability of Benjamin's text, even to those who read German, which would be a demonstration of his proposed thesis as it forces the reader to realise the ungraspable differences between their own language and the language of the text. Finally, De Man also tries to pin down the paradoxical nature of pure language, in the sense that it seemingly cannot actually function as a language, nor can it have all the qualities Benjamin ascribes to it, as some of them contradict.

In his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche puts forward some issues he has with translation. He studied philology before turning to philosophy, and was therefore intimately aware of the differences between languages and translation. His attitude towards translation in the chapter 'On

the Problem of 'Translation' is not particularly groundbreaking, but is therefore useful to illustrate the general attitude towards translation, which I will call the mimetic view on translation, i.e. translation aims to say the same thing as the original in a different language. His position is that translation necessarily transforms, and thereby degrades, the original. The stance that a translation is inherently inferior to the original is in some parts already revealed by the words used to distinguish them: the word original signals the authentic nature of the work, just as in the arts there is a distinction in value between the original and the reproduction. The first notable point he makes is regarding historical awareness. As an example of the opposite, he chastises the men of the French Revolution for appropriating Roman culture to fit their own goals, to then chastise the Romans for doing the same to the Greeks. Nietzsche criticises the Roman method of translation, as they appeared to completely disregard any cultural heritage present in the Greek texts, and even went so far as to remove the name of the original author and replace it with their own (Nietzsche 1992, 68-69). Nietzsche's critique aligns with modern scholarship (as what the Romans did would probably be labelled as plagiarism), but it also reveals that the reverence the original enjoys today was not always present. The Roman translation practice illustrates that it is not a universal belief that the original text deserves respect due to it being the 'origin.' However, in the discourse regarding translation, the general stance is that there is something untouchable about the original which the translation cannot express, and therefore the translation must always defer to the original. The original takes on the role of an ideal, while all translations become imperfect derivations of the meaning and expression of the original. The relation between the original and translation echoes Plato's metaphysics, as the original is posited as an unchangeable form which the translation can only imitate to the best of its ability but never perfect, just as matter can never truly

replicate the forms. This way, translation elevates the original, as it makes the original *the original*, in the sense that for most texts, beyond historical value, little meaning is derived from which text came 'first' as long as the content remains the same across different publications. Due to the impossibility of a 'perfect' translation, a dichotomy between the 'true' word of the original and imperfect imitation of the translation comes into existence, which elevates the original into its own sphere of truth. Only if read in the original language can someone 'truly' understand the text, i.e. have a more 'objective' reading of the text, in whatever way that might relate to the content of the text. A translation will always be tested on its fidelity, which is of course part of proper scholarship, but it also idealises the original to the extent that translation can become an epistemic vice. This relates to Nietzsche's second point of criticism, as he claims that certain languages cannot properly express what the original is trying to say. He sees this as a problem that goes beyond vocabulary, i.e. whether the language of the translation has an equivalent word to the one used in the original. The problem is more fundamental, as he claims that there are inherent stylistic qualities that are imbued into the text by the original language that cannot be replicated in every language (Nietzsche 1992, 69). While this might be taken as a comment regarding the aesthetic quality of a translation, it raises the question of what other qualities are embedded in the particularity of a language.

Heidegger famously claimed that the only languages suitable for philosophy are Ancient Greek and German, which would imply that these languages have a distinguishable quality that brings them closer to the 'philosophical truth.' It is of course very convenient for Heidegger that the most philosophical languages are his mother tongue and a dead language that he was familiar with, but his claim is also somewhat unsubstantiated in the sense that it disregards thousands of languages of the past and present that he was unfamiliar with. Nevertheless, Heidegger's own writing is an

infamous example of an almost untranslatable philosophy, exemplified by the plethora of German and Greek words that remain untranslated in the English discourse around him, with the most notable case being *Dasein*. This view of what is (un)translatable implies that certain truths, or at least certain ways of thinking, are exclusive to a particular language. This would make translation a futile task, as the product of translation would always be vaguely gesturing at the original, perhaps paraphrasing it, but never encompassing the whole, while the 'perfect' way of saying is right in front of them in the original.

I.I. BENJAMIN'S PURE LANGUAGE

Benjamin circumvents this problem by re-centring the task of translation around the concept of 'pure language' [reine Sprache]. Instead of framing translation as a form of mimesis, Benjamin describes translation as '(...) merely a preliminary way of coming to terms with the foreignness of all languages to each other' (Benjamin 2012, 78). The focus of translation switches from the particular text to all languages, as the mimetic view of translation, is primarily focused on how to convey the qualities of the original through translation, while the view Benjamin posits aggrandises the act of translation itself. It is not just the language of the original and the translation that are at stake, but all languages and how they relate to one another. This dramatic way of describing translation can perhaps in part be explained by differing attitudes Benjamin had towards the concept of translation and the actual activity. Berman notes that Benjamin did not seem to love making any translations, calling his attempt at translating Proust an 'unproductive encounter' (Berman 2018, 37), and claiming there is something absurd about translations that are not done

out of practicality or as a philological study (Benjamin 1978:391 quoted in Berman 2018, 38).

Benjamin had immense interest in the concept of translation, but the act itself bored him, and it is fair to assume that what Benjamin is discussing here 'has little to do with the empirical act of translating,' as De Man puts it (1986, 84). Benjamin continues to describe how translation can be used to overcome the foreignness between languages indirectly, as it would supposedly enable languages to develop into a 'final, ultimate, and decisive stage' (2012, 79). The translation affects the original text, as it gives the original the capacity to develop 'into a linguistic sphere that is both higher and purer' (2012, 79). This elevation is only temporary, as this sphere, which he describes as a 'predetermined, inaccessible, domain where languages are reconciled and fulfilled,'(2012, 79) can only be accessed indirectly through translation. Although the translation is the product of the elevation of the original initiated by the act of translating, the actual 'elevation,' the glimpse into a higher sphere of language, is sealed in the act. The original cannot be completely absorbed into the higher sphere, as translation not only reveals the ways the original identifies with this higher sphere of language but also in which ways it still differs. Benjamin claims that what makes a text untranslatable can be found at the core of the original, as translation reveals what aspects of the original depend on the language it is written in. A translation can exhaust the communicative content of the original, but the element the translator is aiming for, the 'untranslatable,' cannot be replicated as the language of the translation will never relate to the content in the same way as the original language. Benjamin therefore does not think that the untranslatable is an exercise of finding words without exact foreign counterparts, but the difference in expression between languages. The untranslatable is an element of the original which is interwoven with the language

that it is written in that cannot be supplanted across languages, although what this part consists of will remain hidden in plain sight if no attempt is made at translation.

Translation thus reveals the intimate relationship that exists between the original and its language, but knowledge of this relationship does not make it possible to replicate this relation in the translation. This does not mean that the translation cannot have a certain elegance to it, as Benjamin compares the relationship between the text and the language of the original as a 'fruit and its skin,' and in the translated language 'as if with broad folds of a royal mantle' (2012, 79).

Benjamin explains his comparison between translation and a royal mantle through the aforementioned idea that translation elevates the language of the original, but as this elevation cannot be applied to the translation, the translated words remain inadequate and alien. The translation still reflects the interaction with a higher language, therefore the royal mantle, but a mantle could never substitute the skin, which means that the language of the translation is never settling on the content, always rubbing against it. The gap between the content and foreign language hinders the translation, but Benjamin also claims that it makes any translation superfluous, as this gap symbolises the relationship between the content and the original language, which regardless of the language and time, holds the key to translate into any language. This is because the gap is not only a symbol of the untranslatable essence of the original but of the foreignness that exists between the original and translation language too. It is therefore simultaneously a sign of unity and difference, and the translation alludes to any other potential translation by exposing the existence of this gap. The translation elucidates how the original relates to its language, which Benjamin describes as the original being placed into a 'more definitive

linguistic domain,' (2012, 79) or, in other words, the translation reveals how the content of the original is shaped by its language.

Benjamin continues his thought on how translation relates to language by comparing the role of poets to translators. He claims that while translation and poetry both explore the limits of language, they do so in different manners, which means that a great poet does not necessarily make a great translator or vice versa (2012, 79). He describes the distinction between the two types of wordsmiths as poets being concerned with the structuring of language, while the translator is concerned with bringing the intentionality of the original into the translated language. The struggle within translation arises from the fact that two languages have to be reconciled in a particular frame pre-determined by the content, which according to Benjamin, requires a different mode of engagement with language than poetry does. He further distinguished the two by describing the poet's product as 'spontaneous, primary, concrete' and, on the other hand, the translator's work as 'derivative, final, ideal' (Benjamin 2012, 80). Here, Benjamin begins to ascribe to translation a teleological role, as he claims that the translator aims to arrive at a 'single true language' (2012, 80). Translation exists to serve the progress of language, and not just the languages that concern the particular translation but all languages, whereas poetry can simply be the expression of the poet and confine itself to the structures of just one language. Since translation reveals how the meaning of a text depends on the original language, the idea of a perfect translation becomes out of reach but also irrelevant, as the ultimate goal of a translator is not to say the same thing in a different language, but to work towards a language in which everything can be expressed. He claims that this language of truth, which he described as 'the only perfection the philosopher can hope to achieve,' (2012, 80) is concealed in translation. The pure language that Benjamin wants

to extract from translation could be an answer to the problem that any truth a philosopher proposes is restricted by the particularity of language and therefore untranslatable. As long as there is a foreignness between languages, any truth proclaimed is expropriated by the language it is written in, as translation cannot overcome how meaning is embedded in language. Translation exposes how languages exclude each other, but what Benjamin proposes with the concept of pure language is that there is the possibility that these exclusions can be dissolved in a hypothetical language. A language that can express everything, and is therefore not bound by the rules of grammar and vocabulary, or anything else that anchors meaning into a particular language.

This is how Benjamin first describes pure language, but its conceptualisation appears to shift when he defines it the second time. He argues that translation should no longer be concerned with the transmission of meaning across languages but with the realisation of a messianic language. This raises some questions about the role of the translator and what part they play regarding the potential existence of pure language. Benjamin admits that this changes the perspective on traditional translational criteria such as fidelity and freedom, as these become effectively irrelevant when translation is no longer seen as the reproduction of meaning (2012, 80). The type of translation that Benjamin desires is one preoccupied with the language of the original, as opposed to just the meaning, which means that the demand that a translation has sense becomes secondary. He alludes to the Kabbalistic concept *Tikkun*, which refers to the messianic restoration of things through the mending of patches (De Man 1986, 90) as he compares the language of the original and the translations as fragments of a vessel that represents a 'greater language' (2012, 81). What the translation ought to engage with is the mode of meaning, by which he does not intend to refer to the meaning itself. The example he gives is the difference between the French 'pain' and the

German 'Brot': although these two words refer to the same general concept (bread), their mode of meaning is different as the French intend a different type of bread than the German. None of these words actually refer to the concept as the platonic ideal of 'bread,' nor do the particular languages have the capacity to express the foreign conceptualisations of 'bread.' Benjamin also refers to Hölderlin, whose translations of Sophocles' plays were at the time of publication panned for their literalness. As opposed to translating Greek phrases to convey their meaning, he translated the words literally, e.g. if Hölderlin had to translate a phrase like 'raining cats and dogs' from English to German, the translation would refer to the animals, and not clarify that it is raining heavily or an equivalent German saying.

Benjamin brings this back to pure language by discussing the incommunicable element inherent to a text. First, he dismisses the role of freedom in translation, as traditionally the discourse surrounding translation is determined by the question of fidelity and freedom, i.e. when is the translator justified to stray away from the original if it makes the translation more accurate in terms of meaning? Benjamin wants to remove the question of freedom, as it requires that the translator transform the text to communicate what they perceive to be the meaning, and in assuming the meaning they potentially remove the incommunicable. Benjamin wants to preserve the incommunicable, as he believes that this is where the 'kernel of pure language' manifests itself. He claims that the incommunicable can be found either in the symbolising (through 'the finite constructions of languages' (2012, 81)) or the symbolised (through 'the development of languages themselves' (2012, 81)) and it is in the latter where pure language's kernel exists. Pure language's existence in the symbolised is hidden, as it comes forth from the development of languages, but the 'purity' of a language cannot be deduced from its development. In other words, it is impossible to

uncover pure language by analysing the historical development of a language. So, while the kernel of pure language is found in the development of languages, it manifests itself in the linguistic constructions, the symbolising. As the incommunicable element of language, the manifestations of pure language affect the constructions with a 'heavy and alien sense' (2012, 82). Benjamin proposes that translation should be done word-for-word, through which it becomes possible to 'unbind' pure language from meaning, and 'to turn the symbolizing element into the symbolized itself' (Benjamin 2012, 82), i.e. by stripping the meaning of a text, the only thing that is left is the mode of meaning, which makes it possible to distinguish between what is said and in what manner it is said. To return to the 'bread' example: translation exposes the distance between 'Brot' and 'pain' and the potential pure language expression of 'bread,' but the pure language expression of 'bread' cannot be triangulated out of all the translations of 'bread.' The pure language 'bread' is not an amalgamation of all existing modes of expressing 'bread,' but something which exists in every expression of 'bread' and binds them together. Benjamin then gives a complex description of pure language as that, 'which no longer means or expresses anything but is instead, as the expressionless and creative word, what is meant in all languages - all communication, all sense, and all intention arrive at a level where they are destined to be extinguished' (2012, 82). To paraphrase: pure language, as the product of the growth of languages, is the goal of all languages, and at the point of their accumulated growth, language is not defined by the need to express anything, be it meaning, communication, sense or intention, as at that point it is pure language, and pure language creates. For the language to be pure, it foregoes the need to express anything, as expression requires a difference between the word and the referent. Pure language simply *is*, akin to the word of God at the beginning of the Bible: 'Let there be light.' God 'says' this, to the extent any action can be

ascribed to God, but in saying it, he created it, as up until that proclamation light did not exist. For pure language to be pure, there cannot be any difference between the word and what it is referring to.

I.II. DECONSTRUCTIONIST PERSPECTIVES

Derrida further explores the theological element in Benjamin's text. He initiates his commentary on *Die Aufgabe* with a discussion on how to translate 'Babel,' as the biblical story of the Tower of Babel is an explanation of the existence of different languages and by extension, the necessity of translation. Although everyone before Babel spoke the same language, this is not the pure language Benjamin is striving towards, as universal speech is not the same as a 'pure' language. Derrida tries to translate the name 'Babel,' as he quotes Voltaire, who describes how in the Semitic languages of the time, 'Ba' means father and 'Bel' God, yet 'Babel,' according to Genesis, stands for 'confusion' (2002, 105). Voltaire points out that 'Babel' simultaneously signified 'city of God' and 'confusion,' from which Derrida deduces that Voltaire identifies God with confusion. Derrida expands on this by claiming that God, who in the first place gave humans the capacity to talk, 'poisons the present (Gift-gift)' (2002, 105) and sowed confusion among his people, by which means his name came to signify what he caused. By introducing his analysis of *Die Aufgabe* with the story of Babel, Derrida highlights two points of the text: the idealistic, mystical or at least theological conceptualisation of pure language and on the other hand, the heretical quality of Benjamin's project. The language that Benjamin claims the translator yearns for is something biblical, akin to the Garden of Eden, and like the Garden of Eden, it is something humankind has

been denied due to its hubris. However, Derrida questions the justness of this punishment, as the story claims that the people of Babel transgressed God through their hubris, while it could also be framed as God lashing out due to jealousy: 'Out of resentment against that unique name and lip of men, he imposes his name, his name of father; and with this violent imposition, he opens the deconstruction of the tower, as of the universal language'(2002, 108). God destroys the possibility of an original language, as he breaks the lineage to the language of Babel by not only scattering its people but also their tongues: the difference between languages that God imposes upon humankind is his, not the people's. As languages and people have become foreign to each other, Derrida describes the post-Babel world as one where, 'Translation then becomes necessary and impossible,' a phrase which echoes through his text.

Derrida tells us that he reads not the original, but the French translation by De Gandillac, while simultaneously German words are scattered throughout the text, as he 'is content to include here and there the German word that supports my point' (2002, 112). This perhaps attests to Derrida's aforementioned claim that translation is necessary and impossible: while he makes it a point to say that he trusts the translator, he agrees with Benjamin that the original language contains something that the translation cannot replicate. He remarks upon this when he comes to the notion of truth and untouchability in *Die Aufgabe*, as a discussion of a text about translation through a translation creates a unique juxtaposition: the reader is constantly made aware of the perils and beauty of translation, which almost demands the reader to do their own translation. Derrida describes it as an 'untouchable remnant of the Benjaminian text' (2002, 124) that continues to exist after the translation has taken place, and it is exactly this untouchable remnant which continues to haunt the translator. To add a layer of (un)touchability, Derrida's translator,

Joseph F. Graham, has chosen to translate the passages Derrida quotes from Benjamin in French, as opposed to referencing an English translation of the German text. This means that Benjamin's text is taken through two turns of translation, the particular thing that Benjamin describes as impossible in the passage Derrida discusses. He starts to peel away at Benjamin in the passage where he compares the relationship between the language of the original and the content as a fruit and its skin. As mentioned before, Benjamin claims that there is a core in the original text that cannot be transported into the translation, since it is determined by the relation between the content and the original language. Derrida elaborates that the core is what holds the fruit to the skin, meaning that the core is in-between the skin and the flesh as opposed to the metaphorical core of a fruit, while translation exists as the aforementioned 'royal cape' He explains that these two metaphors, the fruit and its skin, and the royal cape, could also be understood as representing the difference between nature and technology, with the cape as obviously standing in for the technological. Superficially, the cape protects the royal that is wearing it, but more importantly, he points out, the cape functions as a symbol of their authority and their control over the law (2002, 125-126). Although Derrida does not expand upon the identification of translation with the law in this particular text, it is important to mention the normative forces involved in translation. A translation has to reconcile the rules of two different languages, which means that the translator has to transform the laws of one language into another, inherently incompatible set of laws. The translation will be an accumulation of what the translator thinks are the fairest equivalents, but as no translation is perfect, there is always a possibility to translate a text differently. This is also evident in Derrida's use of German throughout the text, as it removes the responsibility he and his translator have regarding what the 'right' way of translating is.

In regards to pure language, Derrida describes it as something that transcends language: 'It is the being-language of the language, tongue or language as such,' (2002, 131) or, in other words, a language that negates the difference between languages, as it *is* language itself. He describes pure language as 'the messianic end,' but still has to grapple with how translation would deliver this end, as pure language cannot be accessed directly. Therefore, Derrida stresses that 'translation is the experience (...) experience is translation,' (2002, 132) as the capacity to come into contact with pure language depends on translation, the activity, as opposed to the product of translation. He then links pure language to the translation of sacred texts, referring to the 'pure transferability' that is contained within a text like Genesis. In a sacred text, transferability is what Derrida describes as the element of the text where 'meaning and literality is no longer discernible' since the revelations they contain should not be bound to any language. Anything God says cannot be claimed to have been said in any particular human language, as the 'let there be light' was proclaimed before humans even existed. All words that are ascribed to God have been translated into a human tongue, but due to words being derived from God, they should contain the same truth regardless of what language. Derrida refers to a passage that Benjamin quotes from Mallarmé regarding the impossibility of language to express 'materially the truth' (2002, 133), i.e. that what makes the text sacred is the fact that it contains revelation, and if revelation is 'materially the truth,' it would be a means for the translator to test the limits of his craft. That is to say, if the existence of sacred texts is accepted, the translator would have another dimension through which they could explore pure language, namely the divine truth. The translator would come to uncover how different words relate to pure language, as well as the word of God.

Paul de Man, too, notes that Benjamin's theory on translation returns the possibility of the sacred in literature. However, De Man nuances this by claiming that Benjamin's return to the sacred is accompanied by a combination of nihilism and revelation. He acknowledges that this could be an attractive position, as it embraces despair while also leaving room for hope, but he does think there is a problem with the way Benjamin is received in this messianic manner (1986, 78-79). The general reception of *Die Aufgabe* is emblematic of this combination, as Benjamin simultaneously introduces the concept of a pure language that supposedly is the end goal of translation and all languages, while firmly putting it out of reach. De Man, rather than going along with the teleological reading that proposes pure language as the final destination of all languages, inverts pure language to use it as a display of the problems that inhibit common language. He poses that the dramatised view of translation presented by Benjamin exposes the alienness of our mother tongue that we would be unaware of without translation. Translation, which is usually done from the translator's secondary language to their first, reveals that we do not have the full breadth of expression in the language that is most familiar to us, as in the process of translation we will inevitably be faced with something untranslatable, i.e. which cannot be said in the translator's mother tongue (1986, 84). De Man thus poses pure language as a way to expose the imperfection of everyday languages, rather than a hypothetical language that translators should strive for.

De Man elaborates on this as he links pure language to 'the suffering of what one thinks of as one's own' [die Wehen des Eigenen], the sensation that arises in the translator as they fail to express themselves in their mother tongue. He comes to this phrase by accusing Benjamin's other translators of mistranslating the word 'Wehen', since they all translate it as relating to birth, e.g. 'birth pangs' or 'les douleurs obstétricales.' De Man is, in fact, the one in the wrong here,

incorrectly translating it as 'suffering,' by confusing 'Wehe' with 'Wehen' (Rendall 1997, 192).

Nevertheless, the analysis De Man offers of language in Benjamin's text is still fruitful, and to some extent even proves what he is trying to say. This is because *Die Aufgabe* does demonstrate the suffering that De Man is trying to ascribe to translation, although, in a literal sense, it cannot be claimed to originate from it, as it comes from a mistranslation: the text *is*, and *is not* the source. The text does demonstrate De Man's point that the text is inherently untranslatable, which is proven by the attempts of previous translators and his own failure which is unfolding in his commentary. De Man takes it one step further, as he argues that the untranslatability of *Die Aufgabe* goes beyond 'normal,' i.e. interlingual translation, as it is even 'untranslatable for the commentators,' (1986, 86) or, in other words, there is an element of the text that cannot be lifted from its foundation, which means that no commentary can fully grasp the text. By distinguishing the commentators from translators, De Man alludes to the idea that even within the same language, the meaning of Benjamin's text cannot be 'translated' into a commentary that does justice to the ideas it contains. The text is therefore a demonstration of its own thesis, as the impossibility to translate is not necessarily because of the possibility of multiple interpretations (as Benjamin claims that a translation can exhaust the communicative content of a text), but rather due to the impossibility of a 'true' interpretation, in the sense that there exists something incommunicable in the original. De Man calls the text itself, i.e. the original, a translation, a statement which he does not elaborate on directly but must presumably be understood in this context of suffering and language. He explains the connection between suffering and language through the distinction Benjamin makes between 'das Gemeinte' and the 'Art des Meines' which De Man translates as 'what is meant' and 'the way in which languages mean,' respectively (1986, 86), which is the same distinction mentioned before

concerning bread/pain/Brot but described as meaning and the modes of meaning. He continues to explain that these terms create a disjunction, which can be understood through three pairs of concepts: i) hermeneutics and poetics, or how the meaning of a text and the structure of the text gives it meaning, ii) word and sentence, i.e. how meaning is affected by the relationship between grammar and words, and iii) the symbol and symbolised, which he does not mean in aforementioned symbolising/symbolised pairing, but in the traditional semiotic way, so ‘bread,’ ‘pain,’ and ‘Brot’ as symbols for bread. These disjunctions already exist in the original language, but translation exposes them, and by doing so, imposes upon the translator a linguistic type of suffering. *Die Aufgabe* is therefore a translation in the sense that it actively exposes these linguistic disjunctions: it forces the reader, regardless of the language they read it in, to translate the words into a personal way of understanding. These disjunctions already exist in every text, but usually, the reader is unaware of the conflict that exists between these pairs, as they can just read over it, but with this text, Benjamin forces us to realise the imperfections of our ‘own’ language and to rethink what it means to understand a language.

While Derrida affirms the messianic reading of Benjamin, as he focuses on the hypothetical potential of pure language, De Man’s reading, aided by a mistranslation, creates another perspective. This becomes even more clear in the questions that follow the lecture, as De Man further clarifies his position regarding pure language, as he sees how it could be seen as the most sacred type of language, but if put into reality, it would be completely devoid of any kind of characterising features, and be ‘a purely technical linguistic language’ (1986, 96), and he hones in on the essence of pure language, as it lacks any ‘meaning function.’ This highlights the paradoxical conceptualisation Benjamin gives of pure language: Benjamin claims that translation gives a

glimpse into the language of truth, something he describes that the philosopher yearns for which would be pure language, yet if this language is devoid of meaning and expressionless, then to what extent is it still a language? Is it still a language if it cannot say anything? There is a distinction between truth and meaning, but the type of meaning De Man mentions refers to here is linguistic meaning, which would affirm the claim that anything formulated in pure language would be meaningless, as it could only 'say' in a divine creative way but not have any intention or expression in the conventional sense. Following De Man, this would mean that pure language lacks content since it does not refer to the world but instead is composed by ways of saying. Paradoxically, pure language would not be able to refer to 'bread' but it would be able to distinguish between modes of referring to bread in German, French, or English, in a way where the thing they are referring to is secondary to the mode to in which they refer to it. On the other hand, Benjamin also describes pure language as 'the harmony of all these modes of meaning,' and 'the totality of their mutually complementary intentions' (2012, 78), and these claims would imply that pure language does carry meaning, but this conflicts with the description he gives of pure language as a language 'which no longer means (...) anything.' The conflicting descriptions of Pure Language could, if De Man's analysis is applied again, be another element that makes the text untranslatable: if pure language itself is a paradoxical concept, the 'translator,' whether they translate it into another language or their own words, will always have to say something contradictory if they want to communicate the meaning of the text.

As Benjamin claims that the aim of translation is the reconciliation of languages, as opposed to the transmission of a text from one language to another, the manner of measuring

whether something is 'untranslatable' shifts. The role of meaning is transformed, as the actual meaning and sense of the original become irrelevant, while the manner in which a word is meant takes centre stage. The translator's task is not to communicate the meaning of the original but to uncover the untranslatable, the gaps between the original and translation where the translated words cannot do the original justice beyond merely the communicative. The translator Benjamin envisions is hunting for these irreconcilabilities, as they give indirect access to the seeds of pure language that manifest in every language. The translation should not be seen as inferior to the original due to it being an imperfect representation, as the difference between the original and the translation is a sign of pure language. Another way of putting it would be if there was no difference, there would also be no potential for language to expand. Furthermore, Derrida's analysis of *Die Aufgabe* further expands upon the theological implications of Benjamin's thesis, as he relates it back to the tower of Babel, the biblical origin of translation. He also explores what it means for a text about translation to be read in translation, and further elucidates the nature of pure language understood in a messianic way, as he links pure language and the potential truth contained in sacred texts. De Man has a different reading of pure language, as he wants to move away from the idea that languages are evolving into a collaborative end. Instead, due to a mistranslation, he proposes a view of translation which highlight the failures of our language. Although it hinges on a mistranslation, it creates a way to think about Benjamin's theory without having to accept the messianic aspect of his theory. De Man also points out that there is a crucial problem in regards to pure language as it is effectively an empty language and if it is not an empty language, it at least has contradictory qualities. The paradoxical ways of describing translation which pervade *Die Aufgabe* could in some part be attributed to the 'untranslatability' of the text, which brings us back to

Derrida's claim that translation is necessary but also impossible. Benjamin identifies the untranslatable with pure language, which means he tells the reader that we at least know what we do not know. It, therefore, becomes necessary to further investigate the untranslatable in terms of what it means for a word to be untranslatable - or, in other words, what it means for a word to be alien to a language.

CHAPTER II: WHAT IS THE UNTRANSLATABLE?

Benjamin claims that the untranslatable element of a text is derived from pure language - which would mean, that if pure language was revealed, translation would no longer be necessary. In this chapter, I will further explore what it means for something to be untranslatable within the theory of translation that Benjamin proposes. Benjamin describes the sense of the untranslatable as 'violent' and 'alien,' which are also key concepts in translation theory. However, as I will argue in this chapter, Benjamin reduces the concept of the untranslatable to only fit into one dimension, namely to justify the existence of a messianic pure language, which means that there are dimensions of translation his theory cannot address. First, I will explain where the problem of violence arises in translation, and how this applies to Benjamin's theory, since violence in translation is often framed as a problem of interpretation which he circumvents by focussing on pure language. However, if the concept of pure language is taken literally, it would exist as an actual quality in languages, which creates the problem that untranslatability derived from pure language would be something objective. This cannot be the case, as this would mean that neither the text in question nor the translator plays any role in how translatable something is: it would be purely linguistic. Benjamin's theory is hard to test, as few people use his method to translate, so I will explore this issue through the lens of feminist translation theory which shows that a translator's implicit bias can unknowingly influence how they translate a particular phrase, while if they are aware of this bias they can problematise the translation. This would mean that the translatability is affected by more than just the linguistic qualities of a text, and that there are other dimensions than the growth of languages towards pure language that determine a text's translatability. I will then further explore

what it means for pure language to exist, and what kind of interactions the translator has with it. Pure language supposedly imbues common language with some form of alien quality which manifests itself as the untranslatable, and if pure language were to actually be uncovered, the untranslatable would no longer exist as translation would no longer be necessary. It would appear that for pure language to grow within common languages, translation must happen, but Benjamin does not seem to have a proper plan to motivate his reader to do so. As mentioned before, Benjamin did not seem to like making translations, and it would seem as if the mystical concept of pure language does not give enough intrinsic motivation to translate. The problem remains that pure language is paradoxical, which makes it difficult to imagine whether it could develop from any language, and whether it is desirable to realise the end of translation. I will then move on to analyse the untranslatable as understood by De Man's analysis of Benjamin's text, i.e. the idea that translation is the suffering of our own language. Here, translation does not do violence to the original but to the language of the translator. I will compare the suffering that De Man ascribes to translation to the plight of Abraham as dramatised by Søren Kierkegaard, as this will hopefully paint a clearer picture of the existential struggle that the translator goes through, as both the translator's and Abrahams's struggle can be described as impossible, yet necessary.

The discourse on translation is often framed as a matter of violence, yet this matter is neglected in Benjamin's text. He describes translation as being violent once when he tries to explain the idea that the translation has an implicit link to pure language and that this connection causes the language of the translation to feel 'inadequate, violent and alien' concerning the content (2012, 79). Nevertheless, the view of translation as violating the original text is not lost on Benjamin's commentators, such as Derrida and Blanchot, who both link Benjamin's project to the biblical

Tower of Babel (Blanchot 1971, 57-58 and Derrida 2002, 108), which violently inaugurated the need for translation, and therefore created the reality that translation has to transform the original or be silent. This transformation is often described as violent, as exemplified by the Italian saying 'traduttore traditore,' i.e. the idea that translation is inherently accompanied by some form of betrayal of the original, as it is impossible for the translator, regardless of their intentions, to be completely loyal to the original. This is also echoed in Derrida's description of translation as necessary, yet absolutely impossible, as the differences between languages demand that the translator has to make a choice that hinges upon which word 'fits' better, even if the fit in no way does justice to the meaning of the original. In deciding the suitability of a word, the translator quite often has to impose an interpretation which might be contested by an equally valid alternative. Lawrence Venuti discusses one of these examples from the translation of Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, where the translator, G.E.M. Anscombe, translated the German 'Seele' as 'soul' or 'mind' depending on the context. Saul Kripke criticised this approach, as he thought that in certain cases where 'soul' was used, 'mind' was more fitting and that Anscombe was therefore at some points misrepresenting Wittgenstein's philosophy through the translation. Venuti points out that this criticism is not just grounded in the idea that Anscombe is misrepresenting Wittgenstein, but is rather a reflection of the Anglo-American philosophical tradition and its tendency towards secularism, which would have difficulty accommodating the concept of 'soul' (1998, 107). The more diverse array of words to describe the mind in German (also exemplified by the difficulty of translating 'Geist' into English) would therefore be diminished to comply with the conceptual categorisation imposed by the Anglo-American tradition. By claiming that Anscombe is misrepresenting Wittgenstein, Kripke argues that the translation does

injustice to Wittgenstein's thought, which in turn could also be said about Kripke's proposed translation. A translation can never be truly faithful and therefore has to violate the original.

This shows that the problem of translation as violence is often held in the context of interpretation, which Benjamin's theory of translation tries to move away from. Benjamin starts his argument with the claim that the translation is not meant for the reader, and through pure language he tries to reorient the aim of translation as a camaraderie of languages, which moves the problem of interpretation to the background. He frames it as irrelevant compared to the true translator's task, as '[o]ne can extract from a translation as much communicable content as one wishes, (...) but the element toward which the genuine translator's efforts are directed remain out of reach' (Benjamin 2012, 79), therefore claiming that interpretation is separate from translation. This can also be seen by his praise of Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles, who chose to employ a literalness in his translation which was at that point unmatched, in sacrifice of sense for the German reader. The question of violence as seen through the lens of interpretation can therefore not be applied directly to Benjamin's theory. Nevertheless, the form of translation proposed by Benjamin still demands that the translator makes choices, which means that in some sense the translator must impose their perspective on the original. Derrida already alluded to this when he notes how Benjamin describes the translation as a 'royal cape' to the original which not only conjures up images of artificiality (the cloth of the target language in contrast to the skin of the original) but also as a symbol of the rule of law (2002, 125-126). The view of translation proffered by Benjamin is therefore not exempt from the question of violence, as the justification of translation through pure language is not neutral.

II.I. MESSIANIC PURE LANGUAGE

The compass Benjamin gives to realise his theory of translation is to direct the translator to the ‘untranslatable,’ as he believes that this gives the translator indirect access to pure language. If Benjamin’s perspective is viewed through the most teleological reading, this would mean that all languages are developing towards, and already contain elements of pure language. It would be an actual quality of languages, which burdens them with a ‘heavy and alien sense’ (82) that can be released through translation, although what exactly is meant with this release, and how it affects the languages in question, is unclear. Benjamin does not claim that translation helps the development of pure language, but that it brings a sense of awareness of pure language to the translator. Perhaps it could best be compared to Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, where he claims that rationality is an innate human quality which must develop through experience and that an integral contribution to this development is historical self-reflection, i.e. comparing the different degrees of ‘rationality’ in different societies and times. Kant does not claim that this would ‘increase’ the rationality of the society, but it would give perspective on a hypothetical, peaceful, cosmopolitan society that would develop alongside rationality. Translation would thus relate to pure language in a similar vein as this historical self-reflection to rationality, as it does not encourage the growth of pure language within languages, just as comparing different degrees of ‘rationality’ does not increase rationality itself. Rather, it gives insight into the development of languages as a kind of reflective tool which shows the translator how languages can still grow. By posing pure language as an actual quality of languages that unveils itself through translation, this view inadvertently imposes a normative standard on the act of translation, as this

would mean there is some way to measure the ‘untranslatability’ of a word depending on how it relates to pure language. The element of the text that would feel ‘alien’ would not be dependent on the translator, but on the language and how it relates to pure language, which would mean that if two or more people were to translate the same text from one language to another contemporaneously, they would have to experience a sense of untranslatability at the same locations in the text. In the individual languages, the distance between words and their modes of meaning and how they relate to pure language exist regardless of translation, which means that pure language, and therefore untranslatability would presumably manifest itself the same independently of the person. If this were true, a translator could place the responsibility of a controversial translation on pure language, as an ‘objective’ way to determine that something is untranslatable. This could, for example, be applied to the aforementioned translation of ‘Seele’: even if the question of interpretation is put aside, in terms of the mode of meaning, there is no straightforward rule that determines that ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ is closer to the mode of meaning in the original, i.e. the translation of ‘Seele’ into either ‘mind’ or ‘soul’ are both justified to the extent that they expose the distance between German, English, and pure language. This would mean that irrespectively of the translator, the same elements in the process of translation of a particular text would have to be alien, as it derives from pure language.

Benjamin’s theory thus proposes that untranslatability is independent of the translator, but this cannot be the case. The reader of a translation is interested in what the original has to say, and not the translator’s interpretation, which means that the translator’s ‘objectivity’ in translation is some cases defined by their invisibility. This can take on two forms, determined by either freedom or fidelity, as in one instance the translator is invisible by translating the text to read as if it was

written in the translated language (which usually involves a more liberal translation) or the translator is invisible by remaining as loyal as possible to the text, which does usually result in the translation reading like a 'translation,' i.e. alien to translated language. Neither of these approaches are result in true invisibility, as it is a matter of perspective whether or not the translator is invisible. In a more liberal translation, the translator is more apparent if one were to compare the original to the translation, while a loyal translation reveals the presence of a translator through its alienness. The translator is asked to embody the original author in their translation, but this embodiment is a strange request as it assumes there is a rational intentionality in writing that can be accessed by 'embodying' the original author and that this rationality can then be applied to a different language. The glorification of the author's intent as a source of the 'right' interpretation of the text has been criticised by Roland Barthes, as it creates the illusion that a text can be deciphered (and is something to be deciphered) by understanding the author. This would make interpretation a history of the author and how this created the artwork in question, and remove the possibility for the reader to find their own meaning in the text, which is why Barthes argues for 'the death of the author.' Nevertheless, for translation, it is still the expectation for the translator to represent the author's intentions most objectively, even if the author's true intentions remain untranslatable. In a kind of proto-Barthian move, Benjamin's theory of translation avoids this problem, as the author's intentions are never mentioned in *Die Aufgabe*. This is presumably because what the author might intend is separate from what language intends, and this would detract from Benjamin's attempt to decentralise the role of communication in translation. Still, this does not mean that the visibility of the translator does not play a role in Benjamin. His theory still proposes that there is something objective about the untranslatable, which would mean that the burden of invisibility has shifted

from showing the author's to (pure) language's intention. The translatability of a text would therefore still be independent of the translator, as the translator essentially becomes a mirror for pure language as it exists in the language of the original and the translation.

Since very few people employ Benjamin's method of translation, it can be difficult to test it directly, e.g. if multiple people translated the same text in the literal sense he proposes, would they agree on what parts of the text are 'untranslatable,' would they experience a sense of alienness in the same words? Therefore, it will be necessary to approach what it constitutes to be 'translatable' from a different angle, and more importantly, what role the translator plays in the translatability of a piece. In 2019, Emily Wilson became the first woman to fully translate Homer's *Odyssey* into English, and in her reflections on the process, she echoes the criticisms offered by Venuti and Berman regarding the standard practice of English translation. They claim that a foreign text is too often domesticated through translation, which means that a foreign perspective is obfuscated to not alienate the reader of the translation. Both men were inspired by Benjamin, and argued that there is an "ethical" imperative to remain faithful to the alterity of the original text' (Wilson 2019, 281), the alienness of the original should be preserved to counteract the dominating tendencies of the English language. Benjamin does not make this exact point, as he does not explore the role of power relations in translation, but it is not difficult to imagine that he would be sympathetic to this argument, based on i) his perspective that translation should display the kinship of languages, and ii) an imperative he quotes from Pannwitz that translation aims to foreignise the language of translation as opposed to domesticate the language of the original. Although Benjamin primarily poses his theorisation of translation in service of pure language, i.e. the messianic end of languages, which would mean that his proposed form of translation is justified as a theological project, it could

be complemented to include an ethical consideration in service of anti-imperialist efforts. Whilst the intentions of this principle are noble, the application is somewhat more complicated as Wilson points out that during the process of translation, she is not only faced with the foreignness of Homer's language but also with a story that espouses unethical values (2019, 281). While Venuti and Berman argue that the translator ought to be more visible, to properly display that a translation is a translation and therefore derived from a foreign language, this also exposes other dimensions in which the translator might feel the need to point out the foreign aspects of the text. The reverse of this already happens in the domestication of the original, as Venuti describes in his book *The Translator's Invisibility* how Robert Graves, in his translation from 1957 of Suetonius's *The Twelve Caesars* (originally written 112 AD in Imperial Rome), heavily domesticated the text by translating it as plainly as possible. The translation was intended for a general audience, which Graves used as a justification to translate concepts such as dates, city names, and monetary values to their British equivalents (Venuti 1995, 29). These were not the only ways that Graves altered the text to make it more palatable to his audience, as his translation of Caesar's homosexual activity is imbued with a pathologization of homosexuality which does not exist in the original text but instead echo the homophobia of 1950s in the United Kingdom (Venuti 1995, 32-34). Wilson is aware that she cannot project her own feminist principle onto the patriarchal values espoused by the original, at least not in the same way Graves inserted his homophobia into the text, as this would mean she would domesticate the text too. Yet as a feminist translator, she also thinks she must contest what the original has to say about women, which the preceding translators have failed to do.

There is an expectation that the translator must be subservient to the text of the original, but this subserviency would mean Wilson would have to suspend her feminist beliefs to make a

‘proper’ translation. On a linguistic level, she must expose the difference between the two languages, whilst on an ideological level she is expected to remain impartial. Just pointing out the sexism of the original, even without critique, would constitute her imposing her perspective onto the translation as it would make her visible, but in the wrong way. Her ideological impartiality can only be expressed through silence, which makes it impossible to distinguish from indifference or support of the sexist elements in the story. This does not mean that a translator must necessarily agree with everything that the original claims, nor that they must point out everything that they disagree with. Presumably, very few of the contemporary translators of the *Odyssey* believe in the Greek Pantheon, and there is no requirement to point this out. The problem with the sexist attitudes in the text is exactly that they are not perceived as alien, which means that a non-feminist translator does not necessarily have a more impartial approach to the translation, but that their biases are unjustly seen as more objective. To demonstrate this point, Wilson compares her translation to four relatively contemporary translations (all by men) that did not apply a feminist theory of translation. In one particular passage, where Helen describes herself as ‘kunopis’ which literally translates to ‘dog-faced,’ all male translators chose to translate this as Helen expressing regret, either by using the word ‘shameful’ or, in a less flattering manner, by describing herself as a ‘whore’ or ‘slut.’ Wilson points out that while ‘kunopis’ is an insult which was more often pointed at women than at men, this does not make it a cognate of the English ‘bitch’, which derives its value as an insult from cruelty, while the Greek term relates more to the nature of the animal. This means that the insult ‘kunopis’ can also imply the target’s aggression or lack of civility, and according to Wilson, is not usually used to impose shame (2019, 287). The male translators, therefore, saw a woman describe herself as ‘dog-faced’ and assumed that she must be ashamed when this is not

necessarily the case. Wilson's translation is still a reflection of her feminist beliefs, but unlike the other translators of the *Odyssey* or Graves for that matter, she is at least aware of her biases, which makes it possible to question them in the translation.

What Wilson's example shows is that the translatability of words hinges on more than just the language and its potential relation to pure language. Wilson was able to problematise the translation of 'kunopis' in a different way than her predecessors, as the element that made the word alien to her was dependent on more than just the difference between English and Ancient Greek. The idea that pure language exists as a quality in all languages which causes untranslatability is therefore simplistic, as it disregards who speaks the language. Two words in different languages can have the same meaning, and as Benjamin pointed out, have different modes of meaning (e.g. 'pain' and 'Brot'), but even within the same language, the mode of meaning is not necessarily the same across all people that speak that language. Although the *Odyssey* example relates to translation as primarily concerned with meaning, it does illustrate that the labelling of certain words as 'foreign' or 'alien,' and how this affects translation, is due to more than just the languages at play in translation. For pure language to continue to hold, it must be expanded to include a more dimensional definition of language. An element of this can already be found in Benjamin's text, when he discusses how time affects translation. He describes how translations rarely stand the test of time, as both the language of the original and the translation transform throughout history. This causes the meaning of the text to shift, as the language of the original will have different perspectives on the words used: the words might become cliché, or outdated, or their meaning might morph completely (Benjamin 2012, 77). However, in the original, the language and the content are bound together, while in the translation, there is a gap between the language and

content. To use Benjamin's metaphor, the original is a fruit and its skin while the translation is draped across the text as a royal mantle, and throughout time, this mantle becomes more ill-fitting. The original exists in concordance with its language, while the translation will have something alien and unnatural about it which will only become more apparent as language changes. The untranslatability of a text is therefore determined in part by the historical development of a language - and just as it is possible to analyse the difference in language throughout time, it is also possible to analyse the difference in language across factors such as gender, class, dialect, and race. However, by further fragmenting language, the realisation of the possibility that all languages are growing towards a common messianic end becomes even more elusive.

This raises another point in regards to the alienness of a word, as it is not yet evident what it means for translation to 'expose' pure language. Benjamin describes the effect translation has on a text concerning pure language as 'test[ing] the growth of languages,' (78) 'bringing the seeds of pure speech to maturation' (80) and that it 'allows pure language, (...) to shine even more fully on the original' (81). This testing, growing, and shining are what encapsulate the task of the translator, but it is not entirely clear where they take place, as translation interacts with languages, but does not leave a mark on the languages themselves. To return to Benjamin's singular example, the translation of 'pain' and 'Brot' and the accompanying awareness that these words have the same meaning but not the same mode of meaning does not affect either language. Nor is the expectation translation causes these languages to grow into an agglomeration of words that mean 'bread,' like 'Brain' or 'pot.' Pure language contains all of these modes of meaning in a complementary sense, and not a reduction where meaning and the modes of meaning are united, as if all words that mean 'bread' are participating in the linguistic ideal of Platonic 'bread' and that pure language gives us

the 'true' version of the word 'bread.' The different modes of intention are central to pure language, and while translation can expose the differences that exist in impure language, knowledge of these differences is not enough to bridge them. Additionally, the language of the translation does not appear to benefit from the growth of languages, as it is the language of the original that is elevated by translation, while the actual translated text remains alien. The original text sets the standard for measuring the difference to pure language, as the words have already been solidified by virtue of being the original. The connection between the words and their content is held together naturally, which is what the language of the translation exposes when it creates an artificial version of this relation. The elevation of the original cannot be seen in the translation, nor does it change the essence of the original: which means that the effects of translation, this testing, growing and shining, affect neither the languages themselves, the original text, nor the translated text. Therefore, it must be presumed that these effects take place in the mind of the translator.

Although Benjamin claims that the task of the translator is to expose pure language, *Die Aufgabe* is not a call to translate. This raises the question as to how pure language can 'grow' if translation is not practised generally. The image that Benjamin sketches of pure language makes it very desirable, as he claims it is the language of truth, and even beyond any epistemological value it might have, it also appears to have amazing aesthetic and theological implications. Yet it is only in the final lines of the text that he gives a hint of how to achieve it, as he proposes that the ideal form of translation is published in an interlinear fashion so that the translation is accompanied by the original, which he did apply to his translation of Baudelaire's poetry. While this makes the translation more transparent, it brings to the forefront the question with which Benjamin starts his discourse on translation: for whom is the translation meant, if not those who do not understand

the original? Benjamin does not think that the translation exists for those who do not understand the original, as the original is also not made to be understood by a particular audience, but by including the original along with the translation, he affirms his belief that a foreignised translation is not enough to further pure language. However, at some point, the reader will stop translating the text and simply read it as a second language, at which point the maturation of pure language stops. Benjamin wants the translation to feel foreign, going so far as to claim that sense should be sacrificed for the language of the original to shine through. Potentially, this could mean that the language of the translation can be expanded poetically, as the translation forces it to take different shapes. However, as Benjamin has forsaken sense in the translation, its readability becomes dependent on whether or not the reader understands both languages. Hölderlin's translations of Sophocles verge on the unreadable due to his loyalty to the Ancient Greek language, which gives them a certain beauty, but also means that those who are not familiar with Sophocles' work before they read Hölderlin's translation will be perplexed. If the reader cannot read the translation without having read the original, it creates a barrier to its accessibility that can only be bridged by learning the language of the original and therefore forgoing the translation completely, as the original ought to contain everything the translation says as well as sense. This does not mean that the form of translation Benjamin proposes could not have some unique aesthetic quality, but that this quality can only be properly appreciated when the translation is no longer necessary. The form of interlinear translation Benjamin proposes would not work to motivate the reader to translate, as they would first have to understand the original for the translation to make any sense. Or, put alternatively: if someone starts to read a book which is translated from a language they do not know to one they do, but they cannot make sense of it due to a strange way of formulating the language

they are supposed to know, this will probably not lead them to translate what the original says by employing the translation provided, which might stimulate the growth of pure language, but instead force them to seek another translation.

The framing of translation as an essential part in the messianic development of languages, therefore, seems somewhat aimless: on the one hand, pure language as an actual quality of languages would mean there is a measurable degree of untranslatability, but this measurability cannot be used to come closer to pure language. On the other hand, the translations themselves have very little effect on the transformation of language, especially in the manner that Benjamin proposes we do translation, as the (in)readability will inevitably affect its popularity and by extension the influence it has on language. If translation is justified through this idea that it helps develop the seeds of pure language, it will fail on the basis that it neglects the readability of the language, as it puts too much weight on the potential of language in contrast to the reality, namely that language has to make some sense for it to be grasped as language. It should be noted that Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* does not follow the instructions he lays out in *Die Aufgabe* and is, as Berman describes it, 'formulaic and quasi-scholastic' (2018, 37). Benjamin is aware of his failure and ascribes it to his neglect of the metrical quality of the poetry, which would be in contrast with his position *The Translator's Task*, as there he claims that all translation must fall to the superiority of literalness to properly realise pure language (Berman 2018, 37). I cannot comment on the quality of Benjamin's translation, but it is telling that none of the commentators use Benjamin's translation as a way to illustrate his theory, and if they do mention it, it is usually to remark upon their poor quality.

Benjamin's desire for translation to just be about language itself, completely divorcing it from meaning, leads to a pointless translation, as it is a vague gesture to the vocabulary of the original but it fails to capture the original. In a similar sense, a translation which is completely focused on the communicable of a text and therefore neglects the way it is written would be empty too, as both of these are extremes that fail to realise how language shapes meaning and how meaning shapes language. This is not to reduce language to a communicative tool, which is exactly what Benjamin wants to avoid, but to say that there is room between reducing language to pure communication or completely denying the communicative role as is the case with the meaningless and expressionless pure language. Furthermore, Benjamin's theory could be seen as translation annihilating itself, as its supposed end goal would be the end of all languages and the reign of just pure language, therefore eliminating the need for translation all together. The translator's task would be to end difference between languages, to transform the untranslatable into pure language, but in doing so, also remove the possibility to create through translations and mistranslations.

II.II. PURE LANGUAGE AS SUFFERING

Although De Man's analysis of Benjamin's text depends on the mistranslation of 'Wehen' as 'suffering' as opposed to 'birth pangs,' he nevertheless offers an alternative perspective which can help escape the problems that arise due to the messianic nature of pure language. If pure language is not portrayed as the simultaneously unreachable yet final goal of language, but as an indication of the failure of our language, we are at least released from the idea that pure language exists as an actual quality in language. The violence of translation is thus displaced from the original text to our

language, in the sense that ‘our language’ is always the language that is translated towards. Whilst in the messianic version of pure language, the untranslatable, and therefore the alien, is located in the original, in the version of pure language that De Man proposes, translation causes our own language to feel the most alien. The translator does not have to make any decisions over the words of the original, but regarding what is the most suitable word in the translated language. These decisions are not neutral, in the sense that the feeling of alienness in the translator’s language cannot be reduced to the differences between languages. Whilst the burden, or sometimes elevation of a word that is ‘untranslatable’ is often placed on the language that it originates from, this framing is incorrect, as the untranslatability lies in the translated language. This is easily proven by the fact that simply because a word cannot be translated into one particular language, this does mean it is impossible to translate into any other language. For example, one of the ‘untranslatable’ words of *Die Aufgabe*, ‘Fortleben’ is problematised in French and English commentaries (see for example Derrida 2004, Berman 2018, Benjamin 1989 and an in-depth analysis of the term in Disler 2011) as neither language has a proper equivalent: the English translation is ‘continuing life,’ the French ‘survie’ and the French term also has its own translation into English, ‘sur-vival.’ None of these terms truly fit into the original, which creates a discourse through which the word becomes elevated into a concept by virtue of its untranslatability. However, Dutch does have a direct equivalent, ‘voortleven,’ which shows that the untranslatability of the word does not come from German but from English and French. Caroline Disler shows that several things make Benjamin’s use of the word ‘Fortleben’ noteworthy, as it was a relatively rare word at the time that he wrote *Die Aufgabe* (2011, 186), but it is impossible to know if there would have been as much discourse surrounding ‘Fortleben’ if it was easier to translate. The discourse surrounding untranslatable

terms could in part be explained through the 'suffering' of languages that De Man introduces. This feeling of suffering brings an emotive layer to translation which is lost in Benjamin's description of translation as helping the maturation of pure language and as testing the growth of languages.

Benjamin creates a noble image of the translator, as someone who exposes the difference between languages and thereby serves pure language, when in reality the exposure to this difference quite often feels like the translator has to surmount the impossible. Suffering, therefore, is a useful way to understand translation when faith in pure language ceases.

However, if translation is framed as suffering, it returns to the paradigm that translation is necessarily an imperfect copy of the original. In Benjamin's conception, translation is generally depicted as something positive: although the translation is not equal to the original, it exists in a kind of symbiotic relationship as the translation elevates the language of the original. The differences between languages are not seen as something negative, but as a way to realise the potential growth of languages. De Man's concept of suffering does not accommodate this shift in perspective, as translation is framed as exposing the inherent ignorance and shortcomings of our language. The act of translation does not resolve the failures of language but forces the translator into an unsatisfactory choice or to remain silent. The suffering that the translator feels could be explained by translating the task of the translator onto the plight of Abraham as described by Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*. In this book, Kierkegaard analyses the mental states of Abraham as God commands him to climb the mountain Moira and sacrifice his only son, Isaac. Abraham had the choice to not climb the mountain with his son, and therefore avoid the need to kill his son, just as the translator has the choice to remain silent and therefore not commit the sin of an imperfect translation. Whilst Abraham is commanded by God to climb the mountain, the

translator does not have the same divine obligation, but Derrida's description of translation as impossible yet absolutely necessary can explain why the translator cannot remain silent. It would be absurd for different languages to exist and not interact, which means that even if the reconciliation is impossible, it is still necessary for the translator to try. While Abraham has to transgress the ethical rules, that are laid out by God who simultaneously demands that he abides by and ignores them, the translator is reconcile the incompatible rules of two sets of language. Abraham is ultimately reprieved from his task at the top of the mountain as a ewe suddenly appears and becomes the sacrifice, but the translator is not granted any freed from their task: there might be a glimpse of pure language, in the sense that they know what the original means and realise what the difference is between the meaning of the original and the translation, but they cannot express this difference in the translation, it does not manifest itself as metaphorical sheep to be sacrificed. The translator thus echoes existence as described in the Attunement of Fear and Trembling, where Kierkegaard explores ways the binding of Isaac could have gone differently. In these re-imaginings, the loss of faith plays an important role, as he is aware that the mercy God shows to Abraham is unique, and that therefore most people will not get a satisfying solution to their existential questions. Kierkegaard thus tries to resolve how it is simultaneously necessary and impossible to continue to have faith despite the absurdity of life, i.e. how it is possible to continue to exist when what life demands of us cannot coexist with what we believe. This is the reality of translation as suffering, as translation demands of the translator that they maintain the purity of the original but it does not give a way to translate without defiling this purity. Although the translator is faced with this impossibility, they must persevere through the reality that their own language is the cause that their translations will inevitably fail.

This view of translation as suffering returns the discussion on translation to the beginning, to the critique that Nietzsche gives of translation albeit from the perspective of the translator, as opposed to the reader of translations. It cannot be disputed that there is an element of translation which makes it necessarily impossible, but the problem with this view of translation is that it cannot accommodate the idea that the difference between the translation and the original is not necessarily a negative thing. The theory of translation proposed by Benjamin, which yearns for the untranslatable, does not claim the ability to create a more holistic translation than the mimetic view of translation, but it at least creates a way to think about the untranslatable positively. Benjamin's pure language still has a lot of problems, such as the messianic aspect which claims that the development of language is teleological and that the end goal of all languages is a form of language which can barely even be described as a language. This would mean that pure language is an actual quality of languages and that it is this quality causes untranslatability in common languages, which would by extension imply that untranslatability is independent of the text and translator. Pure language would be measurable, but this would only help us to know what we do not know, as it remains unclear how the indirect contact the translator has with pure language affects either the languages at stake, the translator, or the translation. The only concrete thing Benjamin tells us about the interaction with pure language is that it elevates the language of the original, which we can interpret as the translator gaining a deeper understanding of how the content of the original relates to the language it is written in. This understanding can seemingly only be expressed through translation, but the insight of the translator cannot then be deduced from the translation - and even if it could, translation would essentially be killing itself, as the realisation of pure language would mean translation is no longer necessary. However, there are gaps in Benjamin's theory which

make it possible to create a theory of translation that does not hinge on pure language or an inherently negative view of translation. First of all, as pointed out by De Man, translation does not have to be between two different languages, as everyone who tries to give an interpretation of *Die Aufgabe* is trying to translate Benjamin's thoughts into their own words. Additionally, as was shown in this chapter, the translator's identity is not neutral, since it affects what is considered translatable. Benjamin, when he discusses the effect historical development has on translation, already alludes to different iterations of the same language which influence how different languages relate to each other in terms of translatability. In the next chapter, I will explore how there are multiple dimensions to the translatability of a language, which will make it possible to see the difference translation exposes, the untranslatability, as not something inherently negative but as a possibility to be creative.

CHAPTER III: THE CONTINUING LIFE OF TRANSLATION

Whilst Benjamin's theory in its purest form is an unrealistic reduction of language to suit a theological goal, De Man's thesis returns the theory of translation to reflect an unsatisfiable idealistic relation. In this chapter, I will return to the beginning of *Die Aufgabe* where Benjamin lays out what his issues are with mimetic translation, as this will demonstrate why framing translation in an idealistic sense is an unproductive way of looking at translation. One of the key problems that Benjamin identifies with mimetic translation is that it assumes that the original has a fixed essence, something which he contests by describing how the 'continuing life' [Fortleben] of a text affects how it will be translated. I will then continue my critique of Benjamin's theory of translation as reductionistic, as translation in service of pure language only can translate the text through one dimension, i.e. the untranslatability of a text as determined by pure language when multiple dimensions impact the translation. The dimensions that affect the translation are often seen as something negative, at least in interlingual translations, but I will argue that if other types of translations are taken into consideration, such as translating words into music, there are already ways of looking at translation and the untranslatable that do not necessarily frame the translation as negative. Finally, I will return to De Man's comment that the interpretations are a form of translation too, to discuss how untranslatability perseveres even in our own language. Thus, in this chapter I hope to demonstrate that the fact that there will forever remain something untranslatable in language is not necessarily negative, as although it might be impossible to talk about the same thing, it is possible to learn from the differences if they are discussed.

At the start of *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin claims that it is pointless to consider the audience when trying to understand a piece of art. He realises that this cannot be applied straightforwardly to translation, as its existence appears to be conditioned by the fact that the intended audience of the translation does not understand the language of the original. The translation, therefore, exists to serve a particular audience, which would mean that the form prescribes how to value the artform. Benjamin does not give a precise description of what he considers to be the audience, but he warns us against the idea that there is an 'ideal' audience, one whose's essence is perfectly attuned to the art. He proclaims that '[n]o poem is meant for the reader,' (2012, 75) which is a hard stance on the role of the audience, and reveals that his attitude towards translation leans towards a view that the text, or any piece of art, is self-contained. By dismissing the role of the audience he also minimises how the socio-historical context affects it, as an artwork might not be 'meant' for the audience, this does not negate the fact that it was produced under certain circumstances which might affect the meaning of a piece. This position feeds into Benjamin's view that a translation does not have to make sense, as it might detract from the relationship between languages and therefore the possibility to expose pure language. He binds the ideas that translations have to make sense to a mimetic view of translation, which he discards as "saying the same thing" over again' (2012, 75), as it would imply that translation is intended for those who do not understand the original. He finds this view of translation problematic due to i) his position regarding the audience: if the translation is meant for those who 'do not understand' the original, this would mean by extension that the purpose of the original is to be understood by the audience, which would be in disagreement with the aforementioned stance regarding the audience, ii) it reduces the original to communication, as a translation can relay the message of the original, but this would neglect essential parts of the

original as it is constituted by more than what it simply says (2012, 75). However, the translation should not try to overcompensate by focusing too much on the non-communicable element of the text either, such as its poetic style, as this, in turn, leads to the 'inexact transmission of inessential content' (Benjamin 2012, 75). He claims that these types of translations, which are based on the opposite ends of a spectrum, either focus too much on the communicable or on the other hand the stylistics, will fail due to their desire to serve an idealised audience. Either way, the translation becomes a reductionist repetition of the original as the translation comes to represent either a communicative or poetic understanding of the original.

As an alternative to understanding translation through its intended audience, Benjamin proposes that translation can be seen as a form. As a form, translation necessarily depends on the existence of the original to be applied. Although the original does not 'need' the translation, the translation can supplement the original by revealing meaning which is contained in the original but can only be exposed through translation. Benjamin describes the relationship between the original and the translation as a 'vital connection' [Zusammenhang des Lebens], as essential to the life of the original. He continues to specify that the translation is a form of 'survival' or 'afterlife' (the aforementioned 'Fortleben') of the original text. The translation, therefore, is the 'continuing life' of the original, and Benjamin specifies that he is not talking about the life of an artwork in a metaphorical manner, but an alternative conceptualisation of life which is not based on biology. In this conceptualisation of life, something is categorised as living on the basis that it has a history, which makes it possible for an artwork to be living. It is thus possible to create a genealogy of an artwork, as its creation can be related to the sources of inspiration, the impact it had on the artist's life, and the continuing (re-)appraisal throughout the ages, which at that point is called fame

(Benjamin 2012, 76-77). Benjamin relates this to translation as he claims that it is only after establishing this historical kind of fame that translation can be more than a transmission of the original's content, as the history, and therefore life, of a work of art affects how it can be appreciated. To return to Benjamin's categorisation of translation as a form, it is a form which directly relates to the life of an artwork, which means that it can be applied to a text at its conception, but the translation will be better if the original has 'lived.'

Translation also plays a key part in the continuing life of the original in representing the relationships between languages. Benjamin claims that irrespective of historical connections, all languages are connected based on 'what they want to say' (2012, 77), something he does not elaborate on, but must presumably be meant in the sense that all language relates to pure language. He warns us to not return to a traditional view of translation, as the idea that all languages are related in this manner does not mean that a translation must be just judged by how it corresponds to the original. He relates this to critical epistemology which shows that there can be no objective knowledge, in the sense that it is impossible to know the thing-in-itself, but that the expectation of the possibility of objective translation continues to haunt the discourse of mimetic translation. The original is not criticised solely on the basis that it is subjective, in the sense that it is not considered to inherently be a failure on the basis that it can never truly be objective, while this is the case for translation. Additionally, Benjamin argues that due to the continuing life of an artwork, e.g. interpretations, critiques and commentaries, the essence of the original is never fixed, which means that it is impossible for the translation to fully capture the original.

The problem Benjamin has with the mimetic concept of translation is that it falsely assumes that the original has a fixed essence, which means that any translation will inevitably fail as

it cannot capture what does not exist. He wants to avoid this problem by switching the focus of translation to pure language, but this comes with its own set of problems. The idea that the translation should not be concerned with the reader, as well as the irrelevancy of sense, means that the hypothetical product of translation that arises from Benjamin's theory is in practice unsatisfying to everyone, including the translator. The translator would have to become a vessel for pure language and therefore abandon aspects of the original that might have motivated him to translate in the first place. The aim of translation would be to expose the differences between languages which means that other elements, such as sense, or style, become irrelevant. Benjamin encountered this himself, as in his translation he chose to ignore the metrical qualities that define the poetry of Baudelaire just as much as the language and meaning. While in his *theory* of translation, Benjamin creates a binary opposition between the meaning of language (which he identifies with communication) and the way the language means (where he thinks pure language can be found), in his *practice* of translation, he already encountered that more dimensions affect the translation than just the binary between pure language and communication. Like the metric of poetry, but there are also other elements like dialect, identity and form that affect translation in a way that cannot be reduced to the meaning or the mode of meaning. Although he does not relate it to meaning and the modes of meaning, the discussion of continuing life already alludes to the fact that there are more dimensions to translation than meaning and the modes of meaning. These different dimensions complicate the act of translation, as Nietzsche's criticism of translation already pointed out: due to the restrictions of language, it is impossible to replicate all the elements of the original into the translation. In practice, the translator has to make choices as to what dimensions of the original they want to preserve, and these dimensions are not just dependent on

the text itself but also on the translator. As exemplified by Wilson, the first woman to fully translate the *Odyssey*, who in her translation realised different dimensions than the men that preceded her. What the translator takes up as their task, what dimensions and differences they chose to expose, cannot be solidified into one pure language, but is rather the sign of an unending multiplicity that translation makes possible. The existence of the untranslatable, therefore, does not have to be defended on the basis of the project of pure language, but because it is valuable in its own right.

Up until this point, the only type of translation that has been discussed is interlingual, where the introduction of new dimensions (to the extent these are necessary due to the language of the translation) to the original is often neglected, or chastised, as these could obscure what the original represents. However, the idea that the original is necessarily superior and must therefore be preserved at all costs becomes less of an imperative if other, non-linguistic types of translation are considered. Take, for example, Richard Strauss's translation of Nietzsche's *Also Sprach Zarathustra* into music. Due to its form, the translation has to sacrifice certain dimensions of the original, while it strengthens other aspects as the music makes it possible to express a non-communicable element of the text. Strauss's translation is not an attempt to repeat Nietzsche in a different medium, but it brings Nietzsche's thought into another dimension while simultaneously showing the 'reader' the difference that exists between these two different languages, German and orchestral music. The musical translation of *Zarathustra* can capture the feeling of possibility and triumph that exist in the original, and although it cannot replace the text, it is not inferior to the original, as part of its beauty derives from the difference, from the fact that it is not the same as the original. In interlingual translation, this difference is scorned as the transformation translation imposes is necessarily seen as negative, but in so many other types of translation, the difference between the

original and the translation is celebrated, or at least there is an understanding that two different forms of languages cannot be the same. No one expects the translation of a book into film to be the same, nor is there an objective way for a musician to translate the score of a piece into sound. The idea of a perfect translation is, as Benjamin describes it, to say the same thing over again, but the demand of perfection would mean that the translator foregoes the reason as to why they want to translate the text, as it would reveal that 'the same thing' can be objectively determined. The fact that human languages are more closely related to each other than other types of languages such as musical or visual languages, creates the illusion that a perfect repetition should be possible, when time and time it has been demonstrated that it is not. Interlingual translation is punished for an impossible demand, but as our attitude to other types of translation shows, this is not necessary to see the untranslatable as something negative.

Furthermore, it is also possible to see this in translation within the same language. De Man already claimed this when he said that every interpretation of *Die Aufgabe* is in some way a translation of Benjamin's text into the interpreter's words, which will inevitably fail - but this failure could also be seen as something positive. De Man, of course, literally mistranslates a word in Benjamin's text, but it is exactly from this mistranslation that Benjamin's text is allowed to grow and that it becomes possible for its continued life to take a new turn. Pure language, as the end of all languages, would be the end of translation as it would mean that there are no more differences between languages that translation would have to gap. However, as it is even impossible to even fully exhaust what just one text says, is a sign that pure language might not even be desirable on the basis that it would annihilate individual thought. The life of *Die Aufgabe* derives from the fact that it is untranslatable, and the realisation of messianic pure language would end that. On other hand,

the existence of untranslatability, even if there is just a singular language at play, verges into dangerous realms of relativism as it essentially claims that it is impossible to understand each other. But this would conflate understanding and translation, as the fact that the translator recognises the other's words as foreign, even within the same language, does not mean that they cannot understand them, but simply that they cannot say the exact same thing. Even if they were to repeat exactly what the other says, the words would take a different meaning from the original uttering. The untranslatability of *Die Aufgabe* derives from more than just the complexity of the text, as it is also a fragment of Benjamin's thought, which has a continued life, and can therefore not be reduced to one interpretation. The impossibility of a perfect translation, to the extent that even within our own language there remains something inherently untranslatable, does not have to be seen as negative, as untranslatability can also be seen as difference as opposed to imperfection. To echo Derrida once more: translation is impossible yet absolutely necessary as the reality is that people are constantly talking about the same, but different things. No interpretation of *Die Aufgabe* is the same, but that does not mean that these translations of Benjamin's thoughts cannot co-exist as different modes of meaning concerning the original. The capacity to understand that there is a difference between the mode of the meaning of 'pain' and 'Brot,' even if this difference cannot be overcome through pure language, means that even if it is not possible to talk about the same thing, it is possible to analyse the difference between two languages, whatever form they might take, and therefore come to a better understanding of what the other is talking about.

There are problems with Benjamin's claim that the translation is not meant for those who do not understand the original, but it does sketch out a form of idealised thinking which haunts the thought about translation. It is an attempt to create an objective way of understanding art

when art has its own life which influences how it is understood throughout time. However, Benjamin, in his attempt to uncover pure language, imposes an equally strict method on how the translator should understand the text. This method does not work, as many dimensions come into play with translation, such as the life of the text and the translator. If other forms of non-linguistic translation are considered, it becomes clear that untranslatability exists in many forms, and that these instances of untranslatability are already celebrated in their difference. While the idea of objective knowledge has already been dispelled, linguistic translations run into the problem that the closeness of languages gives the illusion that perfection is possible. This means that linguistic translation is an inevitable failure, but it could be framed differently, as translation can be seen as a possibility to create a new understanding. Although there are certain translations which are certainly incorrect, as demonstrated by De Man, even these mistakes can be useful in their own ways. The translation does not replace the original, so even if the translation 'fails,' it is always possible to try differently, to go back to the original. All the different translations of *Die Aufgabe*, whether they are literal translations or interpretations, are signs of the fact that it is impossible to have an objective understanding of the text, but that this is actually good, as it makes it possible to think about translation (or any topic, for that matter) in different manners, to continually let it live.

CONCLUSION

‘Traduttore traditore.’ translation is traditionally seen as something negative, something which obscures the original and therefore prevents the reader from accessing the ‘real’ essence of the original. This essence supposedly contains the untranslatable truth, but as it turns out, even the people who read the text in the original language cannot always access this - because it does not exist. The mimetic view, which expects translation to exactly repeat what the original says and judges it when it fails, correctly identifies that the content of a text and its language are interwoven. However, it falsely claims that this means that any translation is an inevitable failure, which would mean that any of the great works - be it literary, poetry, or philosophy - can only be fully appreciated in the original language. The connection between the language and content is important, and has its own beauty, but this does not mean that there is only one correct way to derive meaning from a text.

In *Die Aufgabe*, Benjamin presents a view of translation which makes it possible to counteract the mimetic view of translation which haunts most philosophical discussions surrounding translations. By seeing the text as a living thing, he demonstrates that there is no essence to be captured, which makes the demand of translation to say the same thing as the original impossible. Benjamin does not offer us a way out of the untranslatable but transforms it into something desirable, but not without issues. While pure language seems enticing at first, in the sense that Benjamin offers us the language of philosophers, it would also mean the end of translation, as all other languages would become obsolete. There would be a singular language, the same set of rules for everyone, which would mean the end of individual expression. There would be

no possibility for misunderstanding, but at the cost of something sacred, something mysterious.

This is in part due to paradoxical conceptualisation of pure language, as it simultaneously is untranslatability but also is the end of untranslatability.

Thankfully, pure language is only hypothetical, as the untranslatability of Benjamin's text is a demonstration of the fruits that come from untranslatability. In a sense, it is not just *Die Aufgabe* which is untranslatable, but every text, every bit of language. In this paper, I have tried to translate Benjamin's thoughts into my own words, knowing that the translation would never be fully complete while simultaneously adding parts to the vessel that represents the discourse on *Die Aufgabe*. While Benjamin's concept of pure language has some problematic elements, it also introduces a new way of looking at translation, where the untranslatable comes to symbolise the difference which perseveres in all languages, and portrays it as something positive, rather than wallow in the impossibility to say what has been said before. While the messianic concept of pure language does not hold, this does not mean that pure language cannot be used to understand our language's potential to expand. De Man's conceptualisation of translation as the suffering of one's own language is not wrong, although it is literally derived from an incorrect translation, but it is too nihilistic to cover all of translations potential. It returns translation to an idealist relation to the original, which falsely puts the original on a pedestal. In his own commentary of the text De Man already demonstrates that there is more to translation than just suffering: it must at least be a little masochistic, there must be some pleasure with the pain that any form of translation imposes upon the translator because otherwise the question remains: why would you do something that just causes you anguish? There is something about the untranslatable, whether it be taken literally in the sense of interlingual translation, or more freely in interpretation, which makes the act of

translation desirable to the translator. When Benjamin claims that the translator is not as much concerned with the communicative content but is always chasing after the untranslatable, he is right, because the untranslatable is a sign that there is something outside of oneself, something that is lacking, but through translation, also becomes possible to create something new, to develop the possibilities that exist within a person. This is the value of translating to the translator, but the translation has its own value too. The idea that the original contains some static truth which can only be accessed by reading it in the language that it is written dismisses the many dimension that factors into understanding a text. While the original is unique in the way that it relates to its language, the translation is too, even if this uniqueness is not always appreciated. The mimetic view of translation would claim that the gap of untranslatability is a sign of inferiority, a reason to read the original as opposed to the translation, but this would dismiss the creative and epistemic potential that lay within it. If translations were read more as actual translations, as opposed to stand-ins for the original, this would make it possible to get a clearer idea of how the language of the original affects the way it expresses its ideas, and therefore improve our understanding of the text, rather than diminish it. Although the existence of the untranslatable is not a sign of a messianic end of all languages, as Benjamin claims, it also not a sign of the futility of translation. The untranslatable is a symbol of difference which should not be eradicated but celebrated as it makes it possible to develop in epistemic and creative ways.

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