Translation, Survival and History

Everything in this paper reflects on how translation of literary texts cannot be thought of as a Utilitarian enterprise whose sources that it works on, and whose targets are simply matters of common-sense, which also decides whether a translation is successful or not. Translation as something uncanny and as making the consideration of language uncanny, has been the subject of Walter Benjamin, who prompted responses by Jacques Derrida, repeatedly, by Paul de Man, and Maurice Blanchot, amongst others. This paper concentrates on Benjamin, though with some sense of Freud, and of Derrida.

Most of the literary texts that any of us read is in translation, which makes it difficult to argue that what defines literature is the literary language it is written in. It should make it impossible to feel superior about translation: it is perhaps time to stop repeating Robert Frost’s words that ‘poetry is what gets lost in translation’, and even to wonder what he means by ‘poetry’, which taken literally, would allow for prose to be translated, but not poetry. In any case, Frost speaks as though the poetry of a text was both self-apparent to all its readers in the original, and as if it escaped time, which changes the very terms of what counts as poetry, and makes it not timeless, or culture-free. Paul de Man finds what is essential about translation that it estranges us from thinking that ‘we are at ease in our own language, we feel a coziness, a familiarity, a shelter in the language we call our own, in which we think we are not alienated.’ For de Man, that is the basis of the idea of the aesthetic: being at home is a language relates to the naturalising processes by which ideological values seem self-evidently true (compare The Resistance to Theory 9). But translation can be into a language with more powerful ability to make ideological values seem true. One negative side of globalisation, insofar as this is also Americanisation, is that negatively, much of what is written today is with an eye to instant translation into English, occluding all difference between cultures, in the same way that novels are written with the aim of becoming films. The almost instantaneous nature of much translation is a comment on the speed of globalisation. But the positive side about translation in the conditions of globalisation is that whereas a text from the colonial centre was once deemed untranslatable, and the expression of universal values that could only be contained in one unique language, now the conditions of post-colonialism have meant that many more texts are translated, as a way of writing back to the old colonial centre, confronting it. Shakespeare’s Henry the Fifth, which is written as a national epic, involves a large amount of French, and allusions to Scots, Welsh and Irish, who are all portrayed as engaged in the single national effort of conquering France, as a way of establishing a ‘natural’ superiority of English, both as a language, and as a colonising force. But a recent volume of essays on Shakespeare in translation not only gives examples of Shakespeare in Japan and China, and Latin America, and South Africa, and in French Quebec, where the example of Macbeth is called by Michel Garneau a ‘tradaptation’, but Shakespeare translated into Scots. Scots is now being treated as a language of the postcolonial; this language which generated the modernism of Hugh MacDiarmid being a reminder of what a culture virtually silenced by standard English. Now Macbeth becomes a Scottish play in reality. But before Shakespeare wrote Henry the Fifth, with its subordination of languages to English, there was Henry the Fourth: Part One, another of the plays which involves the entire nation. Here, the conspiracy
against the king, which involves the northern lord Hotspur, centres on the Welsh: Owen Glendower and his daughter, who has married Edmund Mortimer, who perhaps should be king himself. The Welsh lady appears and Mortimer comments, ‘my wife can speak no English, I no Welsh’ (H4i 3.1.191), and the stage direction reads, ‘the lady speaks in Welsh’; but her Welsh includes her tears, because her husband is off to the wars, and he says:

But I will never be a truant, love,
Till I have learned thy language, for thy tongue
Makes Welsh as sweet as ditties highly penned
Sung by a fair queen in a summer’s bower ...  (H4i 3.1.204-7)

The power of the minor language is to be a lure; the lady is identified with a language which needs to be translated, and which, historically, virtually disappeared, but which in the play is seen as having the power of seduction, even of witchcraft.

I want to refer to one more Shakespeare play. In A Midsummer Night’s Dream, Bottom gets the ass’s head put on him, as a trick by Puck, and his fellow-actors, rehearsing The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe (MND 1.2.11) run away in dismay, Quince saying, ‘Bless thee, Bottom, thou art translated’ (MND 3.1.117). Editors annotate that as meaning ‘transformed’, as if Quince’s own wrong word needs translation, but in the context of their play, which derives from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Quince also means that Bottom has undergone metamorphosis (human to animal), metamorphosis being Ovid’s central theme. And the word ‘translated’ is not a simple example of a misuse of words, for Puck also uses it of Bottom when describing what he has done (MND 3.2.32), and Puck does not get his words wrong. The word has already appeared, also at the beginning, when Helena, describing how she is not loved by Demetrius who loves Hermia who loves Lysander, instead, says to her ‘Were the world mine, Demetrius being bated [excepted] / The rest I’d give to be to you translated’ (MND 1.1.190-191). To paraphrase her statement: If I had all the world, I would give it so that I would turn into you, because you are loved by Demetrius. In the first line, she divides reality up into two: the world, and Demetrius; in the second line, she thinks she would like to be translated into Hermia, because she would then have Demetrius. She has forgotten that Demetrius has already changed – he is ‘this spotted and inconstant man’ (MND 1.1.110) – since he once loved Helena, now Hermia – and when the four lovers are in the wood, Demetrius changes again to love Helena, so that if Helena had changed into being Hermia, she could still lose: Demetrius is in a constant state of translation. We can say that A Midsummer Night’s Dream is a play about translation, where ‘translation’ means one identity becoming something else, or someone else. It seems that identities exist in translation, in the movement from one identity to another; that means that the first identity was already in a state of translation. Like Bottom, identities are already biform. Bottom, become man again reflects upon his ‘most rare vision’, his dream, which he cannot put into words:

The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to touch, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was!
I will get Peter Quince to write a ballad of this dream; it shall be called ‘Bottom’s Dream’, because it hath no bottom’ (MND 4.1.205-9).

Bottom’s language at this point is transforming St Paul, 1 Corinthians 2.9-10, who is already quoting from an earlier sacred text. Paul writes:

But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit, for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God.

Bottom’s catachreses in echoing St Paul, which are followed by his desire to have a ballad written, suggest an unstoppable flow of different versions of his dream, but it could also be added that if, for Bottom, the eye hears and the ear sees, then the senses translate each other into each other’s mode of perception.

OED relates the word ‘translation’ to ‘transference’, carrying something from one place to another, re-siting it; that meaning recalls the Greek metaphor, which the Latin word ‘translation’ translates. The danger in thinking about translation is to limit its implications. One of the arguments that Jacques Derrida makes about translation is that ‘a text lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable’. He says that if it is ‘totally translatable’, ‘it disappears as text, as writing, as a body of language’. If ‘totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately’. Derrida’s statement seems easy, but it is actually more like a riddle. By saying ‘lives on’, which translates ‘survivre’, Derrida links translation to survival. If there is to be survival, there must be translation. Survival, in terms of identity, comes as identity transforms, or, to use Hippolyta’s word, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, as it is ‘transfigured’ (MND 5.1.24), re-constellated into another figural pattern, as the lovers now exist in a new constellation.

To unpick Derrida’s riddle, if a text is totally translatable, then it can be translated from one translation to another; it has no existence as ‘text, writing, a body of language’. We all know the film where we have no interest at all in going back to the novel which it started from. But perhaps one of the essential points about translation is that we do not translate from a translation. So in that sense, a translation evokes the work it has come from, which thereby survives, as often a translation does not: translations have to be replaced because the language they use becomes archaic, or out of date: the translation, younger than the original, proves older than it is in that it does not survive. But the text which can be translated, we note, must also have something untranslatable in it, something like Bottom’s dream, which ‘hath no bottom’, which makes it, literally, abysmal.

What of the text which cannot be translated? That text dies immediately, it has no survival value, because it requires a reader who must step into something which remains frozen, either in time, or in language, and does not permit any thought of another language. Perhaps, too, Finnegans Wake is untranslatable, because, being already a
multilingual text, it could never be put into a single language, such as French: this is another point made by Derrida. What translation does is to challenge the text, as writing, as a body of language, as a unitary, language, above all as a language where things are singular, self-enclosed. That is what Derrida does already; in an essay where he proposes his own translation of a line of The Merchant of Venice, he says that most of the ‘undecidable words that have interested me ... are also, by no means accidentally, untranslatable into a single word (pharmakon, supplément, différance, hymen, and so on). Here, writing is already an act of translation, a recognition that words go between languages, and question their meaning in either language by reference to the other, this being especially the case with homonyms. And Derrida’s word ‘writing’, in his sentence that the totally translatable ‘disappears as text, as writing, as a body of language’, implies that the text is subject to deferral, to difference, that what seems a single utterance is not so at all. Hence the point that a text which can be translated, can be translated infinitely, since no single translation can ever get the plurality, the multi-accentuated nature of what appears to be a single statement. Translation thus responds to the point that the text as event does not have a single meaning. Freud’s Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious shows how many jokes depend on the multiple use of the same word. The same verbal material is taken and distorted several ways, in a true economy of means:

An admirable example of a modification joke [where a single letter is altered, and where ‘everything that has to be said is said in the joke itself] of this kind is the well-known cry: Traduttore – Traditore! [Translator – Traitor.] The similarity, amounting almost to identity, of the two words represents most impressively the necessity which forces a translator into crimes against his original.

The metonymic movement of a single sound, the u to an i, and the silent doubling of the t, translates the translator into a traitor against the text; but this is not the fault of the translator, but the very lability of language, which it is not in the translator’s power to correct, though the translator has to be thought of as in control of the play of the signifier. Language betrays the translator, as the translator betrays the language he works in. The joke is in what the translator becomes even before the work of translation begins, changing his identity, because of an unconscious slippage within the same language.

The doubleness within the original words is especially noted by Heidegger, responding, in Nietzsche, to what Nietzsche means by ‘truth’. Heidegger says that ‘the word has sundry meanings which are not sharply distinguished from one another, meanings that belong together on the basis of a common ground which ... we do not clearly perceive’. The point that all the ‘basic words’, as Heidegger calls ‘truth, Beauty, art, knowledge, history and freedom’ can never exist in isolated meanings, makes for the point that translation can never be accurate: it must always select meanings from the words it translates. ‘The life of actual language consists in multiplicity of meaning’, he says (Nietzsche, 144). Something else is folded into the text. As Walter Benjamin writes in his essay, ‘The Task of the Translator’, a meditation to accompany his translation of Baudelaire into German, ‘all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines’. The sense that there is something else there, is, of course, the motive for translation.
This demand, that a text be translated, associates with something else in Heidegger: his refusal to think in terms of a ‘correspondence’ theory of truth. ‘Truth’ for him means, in the writings of the Pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, such as Heraclitus, ‘unconcealment’ (aletheia). The correspondence theory of truth would say that truth corresponds to what we know, and what we know can be understood in words. Heidegger’s sense of truth as unconcealment means that for him, as Nicholas Rand, argues: ‘translation cannot retain its customary dependence on the notion of truth as correspondence. Instead, Heidegger deduces a conception of truth by means of translation. He compels us to grasp the concept of truth through his translation of the term from Greek’. ‘Truth’ is not, then, a unitary concept, and translation is the way of seeing what truth is. Heidegger produces, in his desire to say what ‘logos’ – word, or reason – means in Heraclitus, something analogous to poetry, or dreaming, according to Rand, where ‘we are led to a crypt, introduced to an unusual situation in which a language stores up the forgotten meanings of another language’ (443). The language of the ‘crypt’ comes, Rand says, from the psychoanalysis of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, who think of the German language used by Freud’s patient, the Wolf Man, as encrypting within it a repression which comes from his original Russian, and carrying inside it his Russian parents’ repression. The point that Rand writes in opposition to Heidegger’s politics should not prevent us from seeing something very interesting here: first, that translation is a form in which truth is articulated, in a way which could be missed in the original language, so that far from translation taking us away from the truth of a text, it opens up the crypt in the earlier text. As Walter Benjamin suggests, translation ‘serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages’ (72).

And that leads us back to Derrida, and his sense that a text, to be translatable at all – translation being the form in which it lives on - must be both translatable and untranslatable. Why can it only be translated if it is untranslatable? One answer to that is that what is not translatable – here, I am not simply talking about jokes, or puns, or bits where the original text is nonsense language – is what cannot be understood in that original text.

Here I will draw in Freud again, writing to his friend Fliess on 6 December 1896, in the early days when he was theorising what psychoanalysis might be. He tells Fliess that he is working on the assumption that ‘our psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances – to a retranscription’. So memory is that which is written into the psyche, and that writing is as it were retranscribed. He continues in the letter to say that at successive epochs of life, for example, between childhood and puberty, ‘at the boundary between two such epochs a translation of the psychic material must take place’:

Every later transcript inhibits its predecessor and drains the excitatory process from it. If a later transcript is lacking, the excitation is dealt with in accordance with the psychic laws in force in the earlier psychic period and along the paths
open at that time. Thus an anachronism persists: in a particular province, *fueros*
are still in force; we are in the presence of ‘survivals’.

A failure of translation – this is what is known clinically as ‘repression’.¹⁰

The translator glosses a ‘fuero’ as ‘an ancient Spanish law still in effect in some
particular city or province, guaranteeing that region’s immemorial privileges’. Freud
gives this untranslated word to suggest that as a country may have a space within it which
runs anachronistically on older, and different laws from the rest, so may the psyche: it has
regions in it which have not been translated along with the others. One part of the psyche
operates on older laws, while other parts have been translated, or reinscribed. The
untranslated part contains material to be translated which cannot be, because it would
cause something analogous to what Freud calls ‘disturbance of thought’. If we regard a
text as uniformly translatable, we miss those parts of the text which correspond to
something problematic, but perhaps unrecognised, which is therefore not assimilated to
the rest. To translate gives the appearance of a text more smooth, more homogeneous
than it is. Equally, a text’s untranslatability corresponds to what is most interesting in it,
because it is symptomatic of something else: these are, of course, the arguments of
Frederic Jameson’s book, *The Political Unconscious*, that every text is marked out by an
absence at its heart, which is something not said, which cannot be said. A text is only
translatable when the presence in it of what is not translatable is noted. But Freud’s
definition needs repetition: ‘a failure of translation – this is what is known clinically as
“repression”’. What remains untranslated is unpressed material; what can be translated
is repressed. What is translatable bears the marks upon it of concealment, in its very
fluency. It is this play between the translatable and the untranslatable that marks out the
work of translation, and it suggests that translation should draw attention to the
differences in the original text, or else, that it will do, unconsciously, carrying over, into
the literal translation, the markers of material concealed in the original text.

But Freud’s image of the *fueros*, which suggests that there are different times at work in a
work of writing, that some pieces of writing have been reinscribed ‘not once, but several
times over’, while other pieces of writing within the same text have not been reinscribed
at all, indicates that every text is witness to a history, and that constitutes something of
untranslatability. What has not been reinscribed, which is untranslatable, speaks of a
different history outside a single chronology, and which remains with the power of
trauma. The work of psychoanalysis is translation, which is interpretation, working from
material which can only be expressed in the language of inference. This is where the
work of Walter Benjamin should be considered, for he thinks of material ‘flashing up’
from the past. I want to approach Benjamin by considering the link that he enables
between translation and history. And here it needs saying that history is not a progress
where everything in the past has had its place, and can be addressed by the historian
assembling data about it. History for Benjamin is revealed in texts which do not speak
directly, but which point to history as all that is sorrowful, unsuccessful, out of time: the
sphere of missed chances; history as catastrophic, a word which is introduced when, in
his last writings, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (Über den Begriff der
Geschichte), Benjamin gives the image of ‘the angel of history’. ‘His face is turned
toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe,
which keeps piling wreckage, and hurls it in front of his feet’ (IX 257). The ‘catastrophe’, a term derived from tragedy, is both history as a series of disasters, and history as what the ‘Theses’ call ‘homogeneous, empty time’. The gaze of the angel sees trauma in the place where things had been regarded as smoothly continuous, for as Benjamin writes in a series of aphorisms called ‘Central Park’: ‘The concept of progress is to be grounded in the idea of the catastrophe. That things “just go on”, *that* is the catastrophe.’

A translation belongs to history, and to the history that a text creates. In ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin says that a translation emerges not from a text’s life, but from its ‘afterlife’ (*Nachleben*), from its ‘continued life’ (*Fortleben*) (71). Samuel Weber says about the word ‘afterlife’; that it is ‘not simply that which come “after” life has gone, but a life that is “after” itself – that is, constantly in pursuit of what it will never be’. The afterlife, more than the life, of the text creates the translation, Benjamin adds. Translation is, Benjamin says, ‘a transformation and a renewal of something living [where] the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process’. Benjamin says that this is not because posterity changes things and therefore changes the work of art. It is rather that the work itself changes. Perhaps it can be said that to read a text of the past, such as Shakespeare, is to read a parallel text; it is not to read what ‘Shakespeare’ wrote, which is, as it were, inaccessible, because we do not have access to what Shakespeare meant by his text, nor can we understand it as the seventeenth-century could, and all the annotation that can be given cannot cross that aporia, which includes the point that we do not even know whether our understanding is the same, or how different it is, from a seventeenth-century comprehension. It is as though the text was being read in translation, though it is translation into the ‘same’ language. The novella by Borges, ‘Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*’ gives the pattern here: Pierre Menard labours to write *Don Quixote*: not to alter or modernise it, but to write exactly what Cervantes wrote, so producing, in the twentieth century, a different text, different in all its implications and assumptions, from the text written by Cervantes. The difference that occurs with the modern reader of *Don Quixote*, or of Shakespeare, is that the lapse in time creates predecessors for the work of art that are after the chronological placement of the writer: Borges’ essay ‘Kafka and his Predecessors’ comes into mind. We cannot read a text of the past without seeing it as changed by a text that it itself, historically helped to create. Translation of a text of the past is influenced by criticism of the text, which has become part of its afterlife.

For a text to have an ‘afterlife’ means its survival, and it may be said that the concept of an ‘afterlife’ is a key to reading Benjamin, who himself did not survive the Second World War, and whose whole subject is the question of the incompleteness of history, and that something of it may have survival value in the present, and for the future. Benjamin’s writing in the 1920s and 1930s centred on his archiving documents of the nineteenth century in Paris, which would enable the writing of the history of Paris as the ‘capital of the nineteenth century’, the title of a series of aphorisms on Paris. The *Arcades* work was left incomplete by his death, and it exists as separate folders, or ‘convolutes’, numbered alphabetically. N is the all-important one, for generating further ideas that Benjamin took up, and N8.1 responds to a letter of Max Horkheimer (March 16 1937) saying that ‘Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain are really slain . . .’. Benjamin responds
to what is really a theory of untranslatability: ‘history is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance [Eingedenken]. What science has “determined”, remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts’ (Arcades 471).

Translation, an act in the present working on the past, is a key to survival, making the past speak differently, giving the present its afterlife. At the same time as ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin writes an essay on Goethe’s Elective Affinities, [Wahlverwandtschaften] which begins by making a distinction between critique, which works with the ‘truth content’ of the work of art, and commentary, which works with its ‘subject matter’. These two – truth content and subject matter - exist together when the text is produced, but come apart in its ‘afterlife’. The ‘material content’ applies to what appears when something of the work of art can be accounted for in historical terms; an historicist model of explanation suffices. The ‘truth content’ is sunk, embedded, within the material content, but is discernible when in the work’s afterlife, historical distance from the work increases another power in the text.

The history of works prepares for their critique, and thus historical difference increases their power. If … one views the growing work as a burning funeral pyre, then the commentator stands before it like a chemist, the critic like an alchemist. Whereas, for the former, wood and ash remain the sole objects of his analysis, for the latter only the flame itself preserves an enigma; that of what is alive. Thus the critic inquires into the truth, whose living flame continues to burn over the heavy logs of what is past and the light ashes of what has been experienced. 13

The question for the critic is the flame: what could be called the poetry of the text which is not comprehended in a model where an historical reading is taken to serve: the flame consumes the interest that keep the commentator busy. Only now does the work become literature, in its strangeness, and in the necessity that it be read differently, because its historical conjunctures no longer finally explain, and are, in their difference, now no longer accessible. In this sense, and this alone, a work of art is outside history and translation is that which brings the work into history, as critique, working with the text’s truth content, is absorbed by what interrupts history as a chronological flow, acting as a caesural moment which brings that chronology to a standstill. That is, for Benjamin, why the work of art is always out of time. Literature always requires us to read outside the present to understand the present, and translation is part of that recognition of the incompleteness of history.

The afterlife of a text in terms of material content and truth content, the question of translation, and the idea of the ‘dialectical image’ are all modes by which Benjamin thinks about survival. The third, the ‘dialectical image’, runs, elusively, through much of his later work, and it involves a thinking of contradictions to be able to think of it at all:
what is dialectical implies two things, placed in contrast, but an image suggests something singular. A dialectical image would correspond to what the English critic Raymond Williams quotes Brecht for: the idea of ‘complex seeing’, like a montage. In N2a3, appears this fragment:

It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what has been to the now is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent. – Only dialectical images are genuine images (that is, not archaic); and the place where one encounters them is language. 

The ‘dialectical image’ brings together what has been and the now. What appears is a constellation, like a pattern formed out of stars. The dialectical image changes the chronological forwards movement of history into another form, as a dialectic – different times and forms put into opposition with each other - and presents this opposition in a standstill: for a moment, everything stops. ‘And the place where one encounters the dialectical image is language’. The point applies equally to Freud’s sense of memory as a script harbouring different times. For Benjamin, the text contains this interplay between past and present: we can add that it is translation which brings this out almost uniquely, since it bears witness in its existence to different layers, different temporalities.

In a draft set of aphorisms, ‘Central Park’, the dialectical image is presented as ‘one flashing up momentarily. It is thus, as an image flashing up in the now of its recognisability, that the past, in this case that of Baudelaire, can be captured’. This capturing of what seems to be an involuntary memory, implies survival. Here, it is not a question of history being confined to the past, and that is equally true of translation, which works over ‘the heavy logs of what has passed, and the light ashes of what has been experienced’. The image of the momentary flash comes from a sonnet by Baudelaire, often cited, and translated, by Benjamin: it is ‘A Une passante’, no. 93 in Les Fleurs du Mal, which has the momentary sense of shock at seeing the woman pass in the street: ‘Un éclair ... puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître’ – [A flash of light – then darkness. O vanishing beauty, whose glance brought me suddenly to life again]. The sudden epiphany that is spoken of suggests that the reading of history, or of literature, is not one of absorption in the past. But in Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century no. 5: ‘Baudelaire, or the Streets of Paris’ shows the political significance of the dialectical image: the modern must conjure up the past, because it lives in the time of the dialectical image, in a time of ambiguity:

it is precisely the modern which always conjures up prehistory. That happens here through the ambiguity which is peculiar to the social relations and events of this epoch. Ambiguity is the figurative appearance of the dialectic, the law of the dialectic at a standstill. This standstill is Utopia, and the dialectical image therefore a dream-image. The
commodity clearly provides such an image: as fetish. The arcades, which are both house and stars, provide such an image.

Translation, it could be said, is the key to the ambiguity of the modern, its sense of different times together, in stability and in instability at once. Benjamin speaks of the modern in terms of the commodity-fetish, which seems to give happiness, but does so in conditions of alienation, which makes the promise of happiness false. The past that is evoked is that before commodity fetishism. The passage ends by defining the Parisian ‘arcades’, spaces dedicated to shopping, and to the purchase and consumption of the commodity: dialectical in being both the familiar, and the promise of something absolutely heterogeneous. The arcade acts as a lure, and it is not surprising that Benjamin uses it as an image for translation; discussing the need to translate literally, he says that ‘words rather than sentences [are] the primary element of the original. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade’ (Illuminations 79). The translation and the original text both point beyond themselves to a ‘one true language’ (Illuminations 75-77). And so does the arcade, but in a specious way, point away from itself to something Utopian.

Benjamin’s almost final writings are the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’. His subject is how to think of history in ways which take it out of historicism, which wants to see the past ‘the way it really was’ (Illuminations 255). Whether the subject-matter is history, or an approach to a text which thinks it is explained by its historical context, an historicist approach is exactly what is contested by what translation allows for. Hence the aphoristic style, which appeared also in ‘Central Park’, and the ‘Arcades’. The aphorism challenges the thought that history can be spoken of as though its content was known, and finalised: it works against Horkheimer’s flatness of utterance, his sense of untranslatability. Aphorisms here are a strange fusion of literature – which I will provisionally define as the modern and history, and the writing is definable as neither; perhaps it can be said that history is translated, into the imagery of literature, and vice-versa. Aphorisms construct imaginative, creative, ambiguous prose, but this is not literature in any familiar sense, and while its subject-matter is history, that does not constitute it as history. Rather, it undoes these two known categories, or genres; literature, by directing the reader to the construction of new concepts, history by its non-adherence to any empiricism. Here Benjamin contrasts historicism, which piles up data to fill ‘the empty homogeneous time’, with a thinking which has the complex seeing of the dialectical image:

Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history. (XVII.262-3)
A ‘monad’, the term deriving from Leibniz, can be defined as an ideal nucleus, that allows reality suddenly to be seen in a single flash, at a sudden cessation of thought. If I connect this with translation, it would suggest translation as a mode of reading, which is also thinking, which halts at the moments of difference, or of untranslatability, in the text. The passage echoes one from convolute N of the Arcades Project (N10a3, 475), which clarifies it, saying that:

To thinking belongs the movement as well as the arrest of thoughts. Where thinking comes to a standstill in a constellation saturated with tensions – there the dialectical image appears. It is the caesura in the movement of thought. ... It is to be found ... where the tension between dialectical opposites is greatest.

The dialectical image is the caesura, the interruption; not just an arrest but a break in ‘the continuum of historical process’, which would put the past firmly into the past. But suddenly ‘the oppressed past’ seems to be that which can be fought for, because it is inside the dialectical image. And that seems to point to something else in translation: that it recalls the past in itself.

The following aphorism winds up, virtually, the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’:

Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one. Thus he establishes a conception of the present as the ‘time of the now’ which is shot through with chips of Messianic time. (XVIIA, 263)

Again, the argument works against the time that the historian as historicist is happy with, in trying to recapture the past in scientific, objective terms. It is essential here that there should be a sense of causality, which helps the sense of objectivity, and causality allows the historian to think of history as progress, of the past as inferior to the present, able to be discarded, as fragmentary. What is discarded from the sequence of events comprise the fragments, images like dry rebuses, which is what Benjamin calls allegory. Benjamin works differently: we can start with the present, which suddenly becomes aware of dependency upon those fragments, which it puts into a constellation with itself.

The present can only be started from with the sense that this is the time of standstill. ‘Now’ is Jetztzeit, here and now, the time of the now, a moment when everything is gathered together, at a standstill, and where everything could be thrown into reverse. It is, to follow Kierkegaard, a moment of anxiety. That sense of anxiety, or apprehension, which comes from a sense of the present as being a moment of urgency, or of emergency generates history; how the past is to be read; what articulates it with the present. Jetztzeit contrasts with ‘homogeneous, empty time’, time which runs on as a steady chronology without a change, the time of journalism, for instance, which knows no history, since
everything – events, personalities, debates – are always to be reinvented in a present which has not been caused by the past, because the past has been forgotten, and in which events, like headlines, therefore always stay the same. The break which comes with the moment contrasts with what was said in ‘Central Park’ about things just going on.

In this new insight, ‘History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now’ (no. XIV). When the present is perceived as a moment of crisis, fragments from the past are sought, not for a refuge, or as a chain of events, but in a way which forms a meaningful ‘constellation’, with the present. The two images contrast: the pattern of stars versus the beads on a chain. This process is postmodern since the postmodern does not ground itself upon a pre-given point of origin. The constellation creates a pattern where the historical is seen to be indispensable to the present, forming it in such a way that there is no division between the two. This in turn allows for the possibility that the present may be seen not negatively, but as containing splinters of Messianic time, that is, of a future opening up which is different from how time is seen now, consideration of which can only be negative. The past is neither devalued, nor made more valuable than the present, and the present is seen to be indispensable to any possible other future.

Benjamin’s image of the past coming alive ‘posthumously’, is at the heart of what translation can do. It is the attempt to lift what is untranslatable in the past, and enable it to pass into a memory where it can be spoken of.
1 Paul de Man *The Resistance to Theory*, foreword by Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1986), 84.
3 Jacques Derrida, ‘Living On: Border Lines’
4 Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 99
6 Freud, SE 8, 33-34. Andrew Benjamin, *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (London: Routledge 1989), 142, quoting this example points out that the end should read ‘....crimes against his author’.
14 See Benjamin’s letter to Rang, 9 December 1923
15 *Arcades* 462