

Deconstructive Figures of/in Translation

Éva Antal, Eszterházy Károly College

What remains open is language... (Derrida)

Wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt's heraus. (German saying)

Abstract:

In his work titled *On Literature*, the Yale deconstructor Joseph Hillis Miller not only negates the Heideggerian notion that, in literature, the universal truth of Being is revealed (cf. Greek *aletheia*), but also accepts Derrida's idea that each work has its own truth and resembles a hedgehog rolled up in a ball. Miller also presents Walter Benjamin's ideas on translation, concentrating mainly on Benjamin's glimpse of "pure language" in his "The Task of the Translator". To display the "puzzling" quality of each translation of a given text, Benjamin uses the metaphor of the broken vessel of which fragments are to be glued together. Paradoxically, while every work and each translation should be taken as fragments of the perfect wholeness of the text, in its purity, being undifferentiated, it is empty and meaningless, since meaning depends on differentiation. In my paper I will highlight the rhetorical figures of Benjamin's "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers", focusing on purity, truth, wholeness, and fragmentation, using the original text, the English translation and de Man's, Rendall's, Jacobs', and Miller's critical writings.

My primary field of interest is reading and its different theories, particularly deconstructive rhetorical reading. It means that in the "close" rhetorical reading of all kinds of texts – literary, philosophical, theoretical, and journalistic – I pay special attention to such rhetorical tropes and figures as metaphors, similes, chiasmus, paradoxes, allegory, and irony. In the present paper I will analyse some deconstructive texts on translation, or rather some deconstructive readings of texts on translation. More precisely, I am going to display the key ideas of some deconstructive writings on translation focusing on the rhetorical figures of purity, truth, wholeness, and fragmentation.

In *On Literature*, the Yale deconstructor Joseph Hillis Miller gives the most striking metaphor of a literary work. Negating the Heideggerian notion, namely that in literature the universal truth of (capitalised) Being is revealed (cf. Greek *aletheia*), Miller accepts Derrida's idea that each work has its own truth and resembles a hedgehog rolled up in a ball. In his essay, "Che cos'è la poesia?" ("What is / What thing is poetry?"), Derrida deliberately keeps the Italian word for the hedgehog, *istrice*, protesting for the idiomatic truth and against the "true" translation of a given literary work. Derrida's central metaphor is deliberately a humble and low animal: not the conventionally sublime phoenix or eagle, but the blind, down-to-earth hedgehog. Derrida says that a poem is like an *istrice* that in its habit of self-defence rolls itself into a ball and bristles its spines, that is, it is a text spiked with difficulties. However, the hedgehog – in French *hérisson* – in its self-defence on the autoroute (cf. on its own way) cannot see his death coming: "Rolled up in a ball, prickly with spines, vulnerable and dangerous, calculating and ill-adapted (because it makes itself into a ball, sensing the danger on the autoroute, it exposes itself to an accident)" (Derrida 1995a: 297). In Derrida's text on the origin of the poetic and its untranslatability we can also sense the breath of the poetic: "Whence the infinite resistance to the transfer of the letter which the animal, in its name, nevertheless calls out for. That is the distress of the *hérisson*. What does the distress, *stress* itself, want? *Stricto sensu*, to put on guard. Whence the prophecy: translate me, watch, keep me yet a while, get going, save yourself, let's get off the autoroute" (Derrida 1995a: 295). Emphasising the importance of the original and (somehow) making the poetic *istrice* feel

comfortable in his text, Derrida echoes the *str-* sound-cluster of the Italian *istrice* in such French words as *stress*, *autostrades*, *distracte* [cf. distracted], in which the “strictures” of the English translation follow the original enriching the puns with the English “distress”, “demonstrated” and “stretched.” The poem like an *istrice* “lets itself be done”: lets itself be learnt by heart as “poetic”, or be translated as “poematic”.

In his text Derrida not only denies the existence of “pure poetry” and pure rhetoric, but also Benjamin’s “pure language” and Heidegger’s “truth-revealing” in the work (Derrida 1995a: 297). Here I found a reference to Benjamin’s essay “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” and though I had read it several times in German and in Hungarian, it was the time to read it again with the focus on whether Benjamin, a translator himself, really affirms the existence of “pure language.” This time I read Harry Zohn’s translation of Benjamin’s text entitled “The Task of the Translator” and I must admit, did not understand it. More precisely, the English translation offered a radically new reading of Benjamin’s essay and as a deconstructor, I would welcome such a “deconstructive” translation; however, when I read again the original German essay and some articles discussing Zohn’s translation of Benjamin, I came to realise that Zohn radically *distorted* several passages of the text, misreading not only its argumentation but also its rhetoric. In my reading of “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers” I will highlight some points of Zohn’s otherwise quite instructive mistranslation using the above mentioned texts, namely, the original, the translation and the critical pieces: de Man’s, Rendall’s, Jacobs’ and Miller’s writings. Although Steven Rendall corrected Zohn’s mistakes in his article entitled “Notes on Zohn’s Translation of Benjamin’s “Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers”¹ – moreover, he published his revised translation of the original German essay –, I can mostly find Zohn’s translation in Benjamin collections and in references. Actually, even his critics admit that Zohn’s “lucid translations have made a decidedly meaningful contribution to the understanding of Benjamin by an English-speaking audience,” here I have quoted Carol Jacobs’ footnote from her critical essay entitled “The Monstrosity of Translation.”² However, Zohn’s critics agree that in several passages he not only “blurs” the logic of the German essay, he also “overlooks the metaphorical patterns whose significance seems central to Benjamin’s text considered as a poetic artifact” (Rendall 199).³ Well, the Derridian poetic *istrice* – or its German relative – seems to defend itself quite effectively here, managing to fool the translators.

Benjamin’s essay is placed as a preface, or introduction in his translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*, published in 1923, and we can take the intellectual-historical context into consideration. Paul de Man also thinks that the current German academic discourse of the 20s can explain such “highly regressive” ideas as, for instance, the poet and poetic language shown as sacred, or the well-known messianic tone (de Man 76-77). However, the essay commences with a “scandalously” provocative statement about the insignificance of the reception, the reader and the translator: “In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. [...] No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener” (Benjamin 1999: 70; 1980: 9). De Man and Jacobs call our attention to this opening statement and Benjamin’s obvious wish to shock his readers, to displace/distort their conventional notions about translation. De Man claims that the translators are doomed to fail as they can never do

¹ See <http://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037304ar> <accessed on 25th August 2008> Also in *TTR*, vol. 10, n. 2, 1997, 191-206.

² See <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2907018> <accessed on 26/08/2008 10:52> Also in *MLN*, Vol. 90. No. 6, *Comparative Literature: Translation Theory and Practice* (Dec., 1975), 755-766, 755.

³ Rendall also tries to give a metaphorical recipe of good translation, where the minor flaws do not prevent the reader “to get the gist”, that is, the core/essence of the text, and to follow the writer’s “drift,” or flow of his way of thinking. According to Rendall, Zohn failed to help the reader “get the gist” and “the drift” of Benjamin’s text (202).

what the original (poetic) text did and he even suggests translating the German *Aufgabe* not as “the task” but “defeat, the giving up” (or surrender, *aufgegeben*, cf. Jacobs 765) in the title. Obviously, Benjamin’s poetic text can be taken as another bad example of translatability – or another good example of untranslatability – and de Man’s main question is why so many good translators translated it badly, or, whether they did it right when they went wrong (de Man 80-81). Carol Jacobs, who greatly influenced de Man’s deconstructive writing on Benjamin’s text, claims that the unique German essay “performs [...] an act of translation” presenting that (good?) “translation does not transform a foreign language into one we may call our own, but rather renders radically foreign that language we believe to be ours” (756).

On the other hand, as Benjamin, or rather Zohn, suggests, “translations [...] prove to be untranslatable not because of any inherent difficulty [*Schwere*], but because of the looseness [*Flüchtigkeit*] with which meaning attaches to them” (81; in the original 20). That is, only the original can be translated due to its “mobility” or “instability”, which is unnoticeable in itself and which is revealed in a/the translation (de Man 82). In his criticism Rendall would alter the two key words “difficulty” and “looseness” to “immoveable” and “light” as the latter ones are in accordance with Benjamin’s previous statements and metaphorical oppositions (201). Before the statement Benjamin introduces one of the most famous rhetorical figures of his essay – the tangent:

And what of the sense in its importance for the relationship between translation and original? A simile may help here. Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly [*flüchtig*] and at but one point, with this touch rather than with the point setting the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity, a translation touches the original lightly [*flüchtig*] and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux. (Benjamin 1999: 80; 1980: 19-20)

Carol Jacobs, in accordance with Rendall, suggests that the German *flüchtig* should be translated as “fleetingly” emphasising the “seemingly tangible” relation between translation and original (Jacobs 758-9). Benjamin also says here that the point of the circle itself is irrelevant and the choice of the meaning in translation is free though it is bound by fidelity. It is interesting that Jacobs in her “flüchtig” translation of Benjamin’s simile says that its meaning “can be grasped [*fassen*]” (759), while Zohn is rather tentative as his simile “may help”. I think, in the contrast between the “light” description of the fleeting touch of the tangent and the “grasp” of its suggested meaning the ironic tone of the essay – the irony of rhetoric and language – is expressed. Moreover, Benjamin’s text itself fleetingly touches upon several crucial points of translation theory.

The central idea of “letting one’s language be violently moved by the foreign,” or as Zohn translates, “allowing [one’s] language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue” (Benjamin 1999: 81), seems to be soothed by the relaxing and comforting metaphors of the text, but the “close” rhetorical reading displays the ironical quality of the figures. The metaphors and other figures are used to present the specific relationship between the original and its translations: the model presented here is not natural, or organic, not even of resemblance, or of imitation (de Man 83). We can find pseudo-natural figures of growing, flourishing, flowering (Benjamin 1999: 72; 1980: 11) and ripening, notwithstanding, we should be careful with these figures. For instance, the German *Entfaltung* – translated as “flowering” by Zohn – can refer to the “unfolding” of meanings *always-already* “planted” in the original. Although we tend to use positive and fruitful metaphors in relation with translations, Jacobs warns us not to take them seriously. She says that Benjamin (or Benjamin’s text, or the text itself) is highly misleading and ironical here, as “nowhere in the

essay does translation develop [or unfold É.A.] beyond the germ (*keimhaft*), the kernel (*Kern* [Benjamin 1999: 76; 1980: 15]), the seed (*Samen* [Benjamin 1999: 75; 1980: 14])” (Jacobs 757).

The other problematic figure is *Nachreife* that is translated as “maturing process” by Zohn:

While a poet’s words endure in his own language, even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the *growth* of its own language and eventually to be *absorbed* by its *renewal*. Translation is so far removed from being the *sterile* equation of two *dead* languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the *maturing process* [*Nachreife*] of the original language and the *birth pangs* [*Wehen*] of its own. (Benjamin 1999: 74; 1980: 13)

In the above-quoted passage we can see a mixture of positive and negative (organic) figures but, on the whole, the devastating images of death overcome the images of birth. De Man (after Jacobs) remarks that the fruitful “maturing” *Nachreife* of the original is more associated with deathlike withering and a melancholic afterlife in its translations. At the same time, the birth-pangs, *Wehen*, do not only refer to the fruitful beginning of rebirth, but can be associated with the sufferings or “death pangs” of translation (de Man 85). This suffering, or *pathos* of translation is linguistic, and Benjamin’s text itself becomes an example of what it exemplifies. As de Man claims: “The text about translation is itself a translation, and the untranslatability which it mentions about itself inhabits its own texture and will inhabit anybody who in his turn will try to translate it, as I am now trying, and failing, to do. The text is untranslatable for the commentators who talk about it, it is an example of what it states, it is a *mise en abyme* in the technical sense, a story within the story of what is its own statement” (de Man 86).

In his deconstructive rhetorical reading, de Man also takes the German word *übersetzen*, which means translation and metaphor (viz. “to move over” *metaphorein* and “to put across” *übersetzen*) as well (83). Although the word means, or rather translates as metaphor, paradoxically, it is not a metaphor, not metaphorical. The relation between the original and its translations is metonymical, which is best displayed in the famous vessel-metaphor of the essay. Let me quote the passage in Zohn’s translation:

Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together [*zu folgen*] must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (Benjamin 1999: 79; 1980: 18)

It is with Zohn’s translation of the problematic “zu folgen” as “to be glued together” that critics take issue. Zohn’s English translation is quite optimistic about the broken vessel and somehow he/it has a vision of the broken vessel of pure language that can be completed by putting the fragments – each and every language of translation – in their right place. In the less optimistic translation of Jacobs and de Man, the possible final outcome of Benjamin’s vessel is still a broken part. Jacobs translates *zu folgen* not as “to be glued together” but “to be articulated together,” suggesting that the different translations are simply made to follow each other. To refer back to de Man’s metonymic *übersetzen*-metaphor, I should say that the fragmented translations give a metonymic, a successive pattern and not “a metaphorical unifying” one (de Man 90). The synecdoche at the end of the passage can be translated as “just as fragments are the *broken* parts of a [broken? É.A.] vessel [*Bruchstück eines*

Gefäßes],” that is, here Benjamin is not saying that the fragments constitute a totality. Paradoxically, while every work and each translation should be taken as the fragments of the perfect wholeness, in its purity being undifferentiated, this desired totality is empty and meaningless, since meaning depends on differentiation. Quoting de Man’s summary:

[...] the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary. They follow each other up, metonymically, and they will never constitute a totality. [...] What we have here is an initial fragmentation; any work is totally fragmented in relation to this *reine Sprache*, with which it has nothing in common, and every translation is totally fragmented in relation to the original. The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment [...]. (de Man 91)

We can think that the broken and fragmented amphora is not the best metaphor of pure language, or perhaps, it is a relevant, a *germane* (cf. de Man’s pun) metaphor presenting the impossibility of pure language.⁴

Before the “non-existent” vessel, in the essay Benjamin gives the picture of the folds on a royal robe so as to present the “unfolding” of the potentialities hidden in the original that are displayed in its translations: “While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops [*weiten*] its content like a royal robe [*Königsmantel*] with ample folds [*in weiten Falten*]” (1999: 76; 1980: 18). This metaphor, on the one hand, also shows the metonymic relation between the translations and the original, and on the other also presents the widening of the meanings of the original, which can be achieved only in its translated texts. With the folds on a rich text(ure), the emperor’s robe can become thicker while in the folds some parts of the text(ure) are still hidden. The royal robe can be read, or misread, as a metaphor of pure language. Thus, in the translation, that is, in the mistranslation or displacement of the rhetorical figures and tropes of the original we can get a glimpse at pure language, more exactly, at the “errancy” and “aberrancy” of language (de Man 92).⁵

Benjamin shows that pure language, *reine Sprache*, is and should be meaningless, expressionless and inhuman since it is the language of pure signifier (1999: 80). It can also be taken as divine or sacred, and it is not a surprise that the essay ends quoting from the Scriptures, the Holy Word, the ideal of all translations. The dangers of language can only be stopped by the reference to the holy script that – quoting Jacobs’ remark – “is as absolutely meaningless as an original may be” (765).⁶ Opposed to it, human language is aberrant and perverse, which is best displayed in its tropes and in its rhetoric. Before concluding with the Biblical pure language, Benjamin mentions the German poet Hölderlin’s translation of Sophocles’ two tragedies, in which the poet tried to reach the limits of his language (Language) giving free flow to the connotations of the translated words. As Benjamin says, in these “monstrous examples of literalness (*Wörtlichkeit*)” (1999: 78; 1980: 17) “meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language” (1999: 82).

⁴ See also about the impossible metaphors of Benjamin’s text in Joseph Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading (Kant, de Man, Trollope, James, and Benjamin)* (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 122-127 and *On Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 62-64.

⁵ “Pure language is perhaps more present in the translation than in the original, but in the mode of trope” (de Man, 92). See also Derrida’s highly original reading of the royal robe in Jacques Derrida, 2007, “Des tours de Babel,” trans. Joseph F. Graham, in Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 191-225), 214-6.

⁶ In the essay a Greek sentence, the very first of the Bible: “In the beginning was the word” (Benjamin 1999: 79; 1980: 18) gives the first fragment of the perfect and empty amphora resounding with only one voice.

Having discussed a “covert” deconstructive text, let me (re)turn to an overtly deconstructive one. Derrida in his interview entitled “Istrice 2: Ich bün all hier” returns to the “solitary” hedgehog-metaphor of a literary work (Derrida 1995b: 302).⁷ Nevertheless, as a “humble” and “down-to-earth” metaphor it stands for a word, any word, destined to be read, interpreted and understood in texts; that is, the little animal is to be killed in an “accident with a destinal meaning” (Derrida 1995b: 308). The hedgehog in its self-defence cannot see his death coming. The accidents will happen to the word, *istrice*, or any other word, that “enters” a text – a critical piece or a translation: “the [poematic] hedgehog crosses the highway at the risk of being run over by a great discourse that it cannot resist ...” (Derrida 1995b: 312). Then a discourse generates another one – on an *istrice*-metaphor, for instance – and another one on the other one and so on. The rhetorical-linguistic process of deconstructive “close” readings is open and never-ending, which reveals, as Derrida says in a collection of interviews entitled *Points...* (also closed, or opened with three ellipsis dots in the end): “what remains open is language...” (Derrida 1995b: 326). In his essay Benjamin speaks about the voice of translation that produces the echo of the original, but does not go to the centre of the forest, that is, it does not enter the depth of the language of the original (1999: 77; 1980: 16). According to Jacobs, here Benjamin *echoes* a German saying: “wie man in den Wald hineinruft, so schallt’s heraus,” which in her translation goes: “as one calls into the forest, so it will resound” (Jacobs 764).⁸ Similarly to Benjamin’s echo, Derrida’s statement – “what remains open is language...” – is a *mise en abyme* since it is unfinished and fragmented with its “closing” / “opening” three dots. Thus, in the two mottos of my deconstructive text on translation the unending process of translation is (re-)echoed.

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⁷ Here Derrida also recalls the Brothers Grimms’ fairy tale about the hedgehog and the hare and their “tricky” running race, where the hedgehog couple fools the hare. The hedgehog beats the hare in a cunning way by sending his mate ahead to the finish line. That is, the winning hedgehog can cry out “Ich bün all hier,” that is, “I am there” (Derrida 1995b: 303). The hedgehog, *istrice* or *hérisson*, is a metaphor that is “always-already” there; this time it is present as a recurrent trope in Derrida’s and his philosopher friends’ – Schlegel’s, Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s – writings.

⁸ Jacobs also remarks that Benjamin’s “translation” echoes the Early German Romantic criticism, the so-called Jena School, and its irony (cf. Benjamin 1999: 76). As she says, “translation may indeed be metaphorical for criticism, but the critical text is inexorably bound to a certain irony” (Jacobs 764).

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