Walter Benjamin Revisited

A LITERARY READING IN TODD HASAK-LOWY’S SHORT STORY “THE TASK OF THIS TRANSLATOR”

FOTINI APOSTOLOU

Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

The only writer of history with the gift of setting alight the sparks of hope in the past, is the one who is convinced of this: that not even the dead will be safe from the enemy, if he is victorious. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious. (Benjamin “On the Concept of History”)

The task historicised

Todd Hasak-Lowy’s short story “The Task of This Translator” gives a representation of the translator’s task within the context of globalization. The story’s point of departure, as its title suggests, is Walter Benjamin’s seminal essay “The Task of the Translator”, which was published in 1923 as an introduction to Benjamin’s translation of Baudelaire’s Tableaux parisiens. In this paper I will attempt a reading of this “task of the translator” through a discussion of Todd Hasak-Lowy’s work and a revisiting of Benjamin’s essay.

The short story is part of a collection of seven stories, under the same title, published in 2005.1 This is the first literary work by Todd Hasak-Lowy, who teaches modern Hebrew literature at the Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures of the University of Florida. All the stories in the collection attempt to approach the position of the individual in a contemporary chaotic world dominated by the virtually circulating capital which seems to have penetrated and alienated all private and public spaces and relationships. The detached, and at times highly sarcastic, narrative voice seems to emphasize the characters’ loss and, even more importantly, the inadequacy of language as a means of communication. Adopting a Benjaminian perspective of history, Lowy’s stories seem to suggest that “What hope there is comes not from the future but from a vanquished past that resists domination by the victorious enemy”, to use Ronald Beiner’s phraseology (1984:426). Although the Angel of History is turned toward the rubble of history rather than the luring discourse of future progress, Lowy’s charac-

1 The stories are the following, in the order they appear in the collection: “On the Grounds of Complex Commemorating the Nazis’ Treatment of the Jews”, “Will Power, Inc.”, “The End of Larry’s Wallet”, “The Interview”, “The Task of This Translator”, “Raider Nation”, “How Keith’s Dad Died”.


ters appear to inhabit a world of presence and present that evades any link with the past, which is visible only in scattered memorabilia that have, however, been emptied of any content, and merely stand as uprooted constructions. Thus cut off from its link with the past, the modern subject is left suspended in a world of non-belonging, which has translated everything into mere empty signifiers, void of meaning.

The story I will focus on, “The Task of This Translator”, recounts the experience of a humanities graduate with translation and history, or better with history through translation, because of an interpreting job he is called upon to undertake. The story follows the character in his desperate efforts to interpret from a language and culture he barely knows, in order to reconcile a family long separated by a historic rupture.

In my discussion, I will try to locate the traces of the philosophical past in the story. “The Task of This Translator”, as stated above, obviously takes as its point of departure Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”; the title creates a confusion to the reader with its almost absolute identification with the title of the essay: the difference, hardly perceptible at first sight, is the change of the definite article “the” to the determiner “this”, a change that marks a reversal in the approach, from the general to the specific, from the translator as a professional to a specific translator. By quoting almost unchanging Benjamin’s title, Hasak-Lowy “transplants” the former’s text into the title of a short story collection and a fictional story dealing with contemporary reality. Steven Rendall in his paper “Translation, Quotation, Iterability” refers to Benjamin’s view of “quotation”:

[…] in the Kraus essay, Benjamin makes much the same claim for quotation that he makes for translation in ‘The Task of the Translator’. Like translation, quotation ‘transplants’ a text into a new context, and in so doing both destroys and saves it. It ‘destroys’ the text by wrenching it out of its former context, turning it away from its previous intention and meaning, and at the same time ‘saves’ it by revealing in it an authentic truth that was obscured by its former context. (1997:171)

Thus, Hasak-Lowy “destroys” Benjamin’s text by wrenching it out of its “original” context and including it within a new one, while at the same time he “saves” it by forcing this perpetual return to the essay.

The book cover photograph presenting a headless hat with the title of the book and the author’s name in the place of the missing head (The Task of This Translator – Todd Hasak-Lowy), automatically places the author in the position of the translator, thus assigning to him “the translator’s task”, “obligated by the duty” not only of translating Benjamin’s approach to a fictional reality but also the individual’s experience/condition in a contemporary environment of isolation, uprooting, and lack of communication, among the plethora of mediators of the individual and the collective experience. However, the task (Aufgabe) is by its very etymology ambiguous and contradictory; it alludes both to the translator’s task and the translator’s surrender; “it is an act of giving and rescindment; at the moment it gives, it gives up” (Lambert 2007:16f). So, the translator is caught up in this double bind of attempting to piece

---

2 Derrida (1985:179) refers to Benjamin’s choice to allude to the subject rather than the process of translation: “From the very title […] Benjamin situates the problem, in the sense of that which is precisely before oneself as a task, as the problem of the translator and not that of translation […]. Benjamin does not say the task of the problem of translation. He names the subject of translation, as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in a position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival.”
together the shards of the past text but facing a predetermined failure, since the result is not the reconstruction of a whole (that never existed in the first place) but merely the projection of its perpetual fragmentation.

The question that arises, then, is why the focus on translation; why is the title of this particular story chosen for the title of the whole collection? What is the relationship between translation and the issues mentioned above? What is it that translation brings to the foreground that is of such importance for the condition of the individual in a globalized world, and for the anxious effort of this individual to communicate through the systems that are available in contemporary developed societies?

In order to approach these questions, we need to attempt a reading of the text which gave rise to this title, Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of The Translator”, a quite dense philosophical text that has given new directions to translation theory, and has been interpreted by a number of distinguished scholars so far in many different ways. Benjamin’s essay sees translation within a historical context that does not take the “original” text as a point of departure, but only as a point in history, which has a past, a present and a future, and which changes through time. Within this context, translation serves as a vital link between past and present: “The history of great works of art knows about their descent from their sources, their shaping in the age of the artist, and the periods of their basically eternal continuing life in later generations” (Benjamin 1955:154).

For Benjamin, there is no question of faithfulness to an unchanging original but an awareness of the changes a text inevitably goes through in its Fortleben (which has been translated as “continuing life”, “afterlife”, “survie”).

[...] no translation would be possible if, in accord with its ultimate essence, it were to strive for similarity to the original. For in its continuing life, which could not be so called

---

3 An example are the contrasting views of de Man and Derrida on the essay as expressed in the former’s “Conclusions: Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator”” (1986) and the latter’s “Des Tours de Babel” (1985). For an interesting approach to de Man and Derrida’s conflicting “translations” of Benjamin’s essay, see Eve Trevor Bannet (1993).

4 A number of scholars have commented on the terms überleben (survive, outlive somebody) and Fortleben (live on, continue to live), trying to establish their meaning in Benjamin’s text. Harry Zohn uses the term “afterlife” for both, while Steven Rendall chooses “afterlife” and “survival” for the former and “continuing life” for the latter to reveal the difference between them. Derrida uses the word “survie” interchangeably, noting a difference in the following way: überleben means “to survive death as a book can survive the death of its author or a child the death of its parents”; fortleben is “sur-vival as conti-nuation of life rather than as life post mortem” (1985:178).
if it were not the transformation and renewal of a living thing, the original is changed. Established words also have their after-ripening. [...] To seek what is essential in such transformations, as well as in the equally constant transformations of sense, in the subjectivity of later generations rather than in the inner life of language and its works, would be [...] to confuse the ground and the essence of a thing; or, putting it more strongly, it would be to deny out of an impotence of thought, one of the most powerful and fruitful historical processes. (1955:155f)

The task of the translator, therefore, “as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in a position of heir” (1985:179), to use Derrida’s formulation, is to promote the original’s “survival”, and to establish a dialogue between the translation and the source text, as well as between past and present.

This dialogue has a restorative power that is represented by Benjamin though the metaphor of piecing together a vessel’s fragments:

Just as fragments of a vessel, in order to be fitted together, must correspond to each other in the tiniest details but need not resemble each other, so translation, instead of making itself resemble the meaning of the original, must lovingly, and in detail, fashion in its own language a counterpart to the original’s mode of intention, in order to make both of them recognizable as fragments of a vessel, as fragments of a greater language. (1955:161)

Quite interestingly, a similar metaphor is used by Benjamin to present our relationship to history in his work “On the Concept of History” when he refers to the Angel of History, “who keeps the dead alive, that is deadly, who envisions for us their defeated force rather than their easy transumption by the latest political rhetoric” (Hartman 1980:76): “His face is turned toward the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed” (IX).

This is one of the instances where Benjamin uses the discourse of Jewish tradition to discuss politics, history, and culture; the allusion is probably to the “breaking of the vessels” (Shevirat ha-Kelim) in Lurianic Kabbalah, a theosophical approach to the creation of the world, which is based on the concepts of creation (through contraction/withdrawal), deconstruction (through the breaking of the vessels), and restoration (through the correct practices that will finally lead to a putting together of the vessel shards and thus to the restoration of initial harmony). This concept, promoted by Lurianic Kabbalah after the persecution and exile of Jews in Spain, can be seen as a dialogue between history and religion; the return to the origins of Cosmos explains the historical experience of exile and hints to the hope of historical redemption. David Biale makes an extensive reference to Scholem’s interpretation of

---

5 Joseph Graham’s explains in his Translator’s Note of Derrida’s “Des Tours de Babel”: “survie. The word means ‘survival’ as well as ‘afterlife’; its use in the text also brings out the subliminal sense of more life and more than life. The hyphenation of “sur-vival” is an admitted cheat” (Graham 1985:206).

6 Eliahu Klein describes the process of reconstruction (tikkun) as presented in Lurianic Kabbalah: “The next stage in creation consists in utilizing this emerging creative energy that has lost control, collapsed or has become discarded cosmic flotsam. In Kabbalah, this state leads to the rebuilding and reconstituting of these ‘shattered pieces’ of light. Creation enters a new paradigm: the paradigm of tikkun, or the restoration of the initial experiment of creation. How does one fix and restore? By building and creating something better. In the unfolding vision of the Ari, the greatest tikkun happens when disjointed, disparate and disconnected energies become integrated; when created entities can relate with each other. Thus, the major Divine archetypes are described as emerging and evolving out of this collapse of energy, the shattering of the vessels”.
this move: “The Kabbalists responded to the historical crisis by transposing it to a cosmic framework: the desire for historical redemption was reinterpreted as a symbol of the mystical desire to return the cosmos to its original harmony” (1979:80).

Benjamin resorts to a revisionism of this religious discourse to explain the task of the translator, a task similar to that of the historiographer in that they both have to piece together the shards of a broken vessel, a process that will allow the “truth” of the text, the truth of (its) history, to break in. His fragmentary approach, that breaks the illusive linearity of time and progress, can also be visibly perceived in his “Theses” through the writing style; his “Theses” are broken pieces of thought, sometimes expressed in a parabolic way, brought together in one essay.

The translator has a preferred position in this disruptive dialogue, because s/he opens into the language of the other; this ruptures the language and culture within which one is confined and allows a glimpse into the relationship between languages and cultures, and between their past and present. However, this remains a utopian task since the shards can never be fully restored. The translator, like the Angel of History, can only stare at the non-linear rubble of the past and attempt to piece them together but to no avail. Although “The Task” is more optimistic and hints at the achievement of a “pure language” through the “growth” of languages that is brought by translation, again this task seems to be moving only on a theoretical plane.

The task assigned

In the story, the main character, Ben, a student at a “center of higher learning” (Hasak-Lowy 2005:151), is at one point “forced” to become part of a list of translators, because one of his fellow students, Ted, sets up a translation agency as a result of his fascination with the prefix “trans”: “Ted did develop a fondness for the prefix “trans”. […] over time its semantic cousins – transportation, translation, transcendence, Transylvania, transplant, transsexual, transmission – wherever they appeared, pricked him somehow” (2005:150). The prefix “trans” – a Latin noun meaning “across”, “over” or “on the opposite side” – by being attached to completely different and unrelated words, is here bared of its meaning and left as an empty sign with no specific referent. Perhaps it stands for the characters’ desire for a passage “beyond” their reality, which remains perpetually unsatisfied.

The passage to the “beyond” is only approached by Ben, whose moment of interpreting is a moment of awakening into history, but like everything else in Hasak-Lowy’s collection of stories, it remains superfluous. The first stage of the passage is the contact with the foreign language: Ben took “an obscure language. This language is a European language, but serious-

---

7 The historian Gersham Scholem, Benjamin’s friend and correspondent, was an expert on the symbols of Kabbalah.
8 The main character’s name could be another allusion to Walter Benjamin, perhaps pointing to the survival of the philosopher’s text.
9 The focus on interpreting rather than written translation in Lowy’s story further questions the idea of borders. As I will show later, the process of interpreting collapses any clear identifications and delimitations; it highlights the fluidity of identities, like the fluidity of languages, which merge one with the other in the simultaneity of the process. Moreover, interpreting through the physical presence of a mediating party that acts as a link and disrupts the communication chain, through the ethical demand for absence despite physical presence, the unavoidable gaps and mis-interpretings, could be seen as a metaphor for the complexity and inadequacy of communication.
ly Eastern European, entirely marginal in pretty much anyone’s genealogy of languages, just barely getting invited to the Indo-European family table. Just barely. Balto maybe, Slavic probably” (2005:151f). The narrator here seems to reflect a general ignorance which leads to simplifications and generalizations not only about the language but also about the “unfortunates” who speak, or are spoken by, this language. This attitude deprives the Other of a specific and tangible identity and includes it in a broad category of negative connotations:

This language hardly gets much mention outside of its local habitat, though it is the language spoken by those unfortunates that every fifteen years or so, whether under the auspices of fascist, Communist, or unspecified geopolitical misguidance, rise to international attention as they and their linguistic neighbours do horrible things to each other in the name of nation, religion, ethnicity, etc. (2005:152)

Evidently, the narrator adopts the hegemonic position of a language that “speaks” the reality of globality; this reality may, to use Manfred Steger’s definition, signify “a social condition characterized by the existence of global economic, political, cultural, and environmental interconnections and flows that make many of the currently existing borders and boundaries irrelevant” (2003:7) but hides a well organized system of control. For a representative of the American culture, this language is “obscure”, “marginal”, without specific origins, not part of the “family”, spoken by “unfortunates” who would do “horrible things” to “their linguistic neighbours”, and again this seems of little interest to the narrator; what is important is that the language remains “obscure” thus hidden, confusing, unknown.

Another empty sign, this language without a specific name and origin or territory, is vaguely present but mostly absent throughout the text, not only because of the absence of a name, but also because of its complete physical absence; not a single word of the language is given, apart from the client’s name, Goran Vansalivich, which stands out as an isolated signifier probably pointing to the geographical territory of the Balkans, the “specter [...] haunting Western culture” (Todorova 2009:3).10 In her very interesting book Imagining the Balkans, Maria Todorova suggests that the signifier “Balkan”, “saturated with a social and cultural meaning” (2009:21) and de-historicized, goes far beyond its geographical boundaries, to denote

   filth, passivity, unreliability, misogyny, propensity for intrigue, insincerity, opportunism, laziness, superstitiousness, lethargy, sluggishness, inefficiency, incompetent bureaucracy.

   ‘Balkan’, while overlapping with ‘Oriental’, had additional characteristics as cruelty, boorishness, instability, and unpredictability. Both categories were used against the concept of Europe symbolizing cleanliness, order, self-control, strength of character, sense of law, justice, efficient administration. (2009:119)

10 “Goran”, as Wikipedia (2012a) informs us, “is a Slavic male first name often used in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Montenegro, the Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia”. According to the same source, the suffix –ovich also alludes to a Slavic or Baltic origin: “-ich, -vich, -vych, -ovich, -owicz: Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Belarus, Poland, Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Republic of Macedonia (rare), occasionally Bulgaria”. We read about Serbian surnames: “Most Serbian surnames (like Bosniak, Croatian and Montenegrin) have the surname suffix -ić (Serbo-Croatian pronunciation: [it], Cyrillic: -ић). This is often transliterated as -ic or -ici. In English-speaking countries, Serbian names have often been transcribed with a phonetic ending, -ich or -itch. [...] The -ić suffix is a Slavic diminutive, originally functioning to create patronymics. Thus the surname Petrić signifies little Petar, similar to Mac (“son of”) in Scottish & Irish, and O’ (grandson of) in Irish names. It is estimated that some two thirds of all Serbian surnames end in -ić and some 80% of Serbs carry such a surname” (Wikipedia 2012a).
In other words, the term Balkan (after World War I and particularly after the dissolution of Yugoslavia) has been made to stand for an un-homely “other” of civilized Europe.¹¹

The story leaves us only with the name and incomplete translations through the inadequate interpreter (who knows only “Some basic greetings and conversation, a few hundred words, a handful of strange idioms. A poem by some survivor, victim, witness-type” (2005:153)), which hide rather than reveal meaning, as we can see from the following excerpt from the scene where Ben first meets his client:

My name is Goran Vansalivich and I blah you blah. Blah years ago my brothers (passive marker?) blah by blah. I tried blah to blah (assert myself?) but I could not. Their younger children (passive marker?) blah from my country and blah to your country, blah blah blah. I tried to explain why I blah not blah blah, but they blah blah blah anyway blah blah blah. (2005:156)

Given from the perspective of the prospective interpreter, this monologue, like the two more excerpts that follow it, is barely understood. Goran’s monologues are depicted as dispersed fragments that are inserted in the flow of the narrative in the form of indented excerpts telling a story within the story and breaking the unity, the linearity of time and progress. The story is given in broken shards that are dispersed throughout the narrative. Like Benjamin’s translator and historiographer, the reader and the main character try to put together the fragments in order to reconstruct the story behind the gaps, but there is still a void. The only information that surfaces through these fragments is that this man is telling a story about his brothers and their children, and his need to explain. So, it is probably a past misunderstanding (which gives rise to the need to explain) that has to be restituted via the translator, which brings us back to the title of the story and Benjamin’s title, “the task” that the interpreter literally has to perform and which Derrida so aptly describes:

The title also says, from its first word, the task (Aufgabe), the mission to which one is destined (always by the other), the commitment, the duty, the debt, the responsibility. Already at stake is a law, an injunction for which the translator has to be responsible. He must also acquit himself, and of something that implies perhaps a fault, a fall, an error and perhaps a crime. The essay has as horizon, it will be seen, a ‘reconciliation’ (1985:175).

In his need to promote this “reconciliation” by piecing together the shards, Ben contacts numerous schools, institutions, and bookstores in order “to (re?)learn the obscure language in question”, before he realizes that he has “to settle on poring through an old copy of this language’s dictionary at the downtown library” (Hasak-Lowy 2005:155). He finally finds a film with “the original language undisturbed. Better yet, accompanied by English equivalents” (2005:159), which he tries to memorize by watching twenty-six times in five days, “rewind-

¹¹ The following are two references to the pejorative use of the term “Balkan”: in the chapter “Balkan States” of the Oxford Encyclopedia of the Islamic World (2012) the authors Popovic and Karić mention that “The Balkans are often pejoratively described in the European social sciences as ‘wild Europe’, a region that is not quite Europe, a ‘powder-keg’, a land in which everything is topsy-turvy. This has helped create the negative reputation that is still associated with the Balkans in much of the European social sciences and historical studies”; the Encyclopedia Britannica (2012) also makes a short reference to the pejorative use of the term balkanization: “The term also is used to refer to ethnic conflict within multiethnic states. It was coined at the end of World War I to describe the ethnic and political fragmentation that followed the breakup of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Balkans. (The term Balkanization is today invoked to explain the disintegration of some multiethnic states and their devolution into dictatorship, ethnic cleansing, and civil war)”.
ing, pausing, relistening, transcribing, and imitating” (2005:159). The only information conveyed about the film is a sketch of the plot in the following lines:

The smaller man – clever, but weak and apologetic – spoke softly and quickly, enraging Ben. His cellmate was animated and proud, his words, thankfully, delivered in slow, important portions, everything a speech or sermon […] Ben hated the little man, and was grateful that he, too, had eventually been captured and imprisoned alongside the leader he betrayed. Like a play unimaginatively adapted for the screen, scene after scene of conversations in the cell. The sadistic guard appearing occasionally. (2005:159f)

At some point, however, the film loses its pure linguistic value; it becomes a cultural product for Ben, but again undecipherable, despite the “English equivalents”, and he tries “find out how it all ended”:

The ending seemed a bit unresolved, or at least open-ended. […] Dammit. The ending, what is it? Ben didn’t like this. He did, sort of, but not really. More captivated than pleased. He had forgotten the whole foreign-language business in the meantime, and watched the film three times beginning to end determined to get to the truth (2005:160f).

Contact with this obscure foreign culture seems to have invaded him somehow. The linguistic pursuit is now turned into a cultural pursuit, and his task is suddenly transformed from a purely linguistic endeavor to a deeper contact with otherness. The allusion here seems to be to Benjamin’s conception of translation as expansion and growth; and it is this growth that Benjamin promotes in his essay through citing Rudolf Pannwitz maintaining the original play with capitalization, punctuation and syntax:

our translations even the best start out from a false principle they want to germanize Indic Greek English into German instead of indicizing, Graecizing, anglicizing German […] the fundamental error of the translator is that he holds fast to the state in which his own language happens to be rather than allowing it to be put powerfully in movement by the foreign language. […] he must broaden and deepen his own language through the foreign one […]. (2005:163f)12

His task, then, to a certain extent, leads the prospective translator to an expansion beyond linguistic forms and into a deeper cultural and political understanding; Ben is determined to find the truth, a truth that keeps evading him like the language itself, because it was never there in the first place, thus rendering the whole experience of watching a film radically foreign. Carol Jacobs describes this process of alienation: “For Benjamin, 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” (1975:756). And it is more than just the plot that is hidden or the ending that is not an ending, it is also the very genre of the film that is under question, with the boundaries between reality/fiction becoming blurred. Everything, in a way, becomes “messy”: “Things, in all its senses, had gotten a bit messy, again, in all its senses. 

The mess with the language, the mess with the film, contaminates everything, the house, even Ben’s body. We should not forget that “Balkan” is associated with “filth” as opposed to Europe’s cleanliness. And to make things worse, Ben grows to like that mess, captivated as he is by this foreign film, and this alien “stench” emitted by his body, so foreign that seems to belong to someone else: “The odor is so powerful and foreign, he must look at his image once

---

12 For the violations of punctuation and capitalization in the quotation from Pannwitz, see Rendall (1997:178f).
more in the mirror to verify that this is indeed him and not some rank imposter” (2005:162). Ben’s exposure to this otherness seems to have invaded him, but only for a fleeting moment. His stench is washed away and he returns to his old, clean and intact self.

However, this rich mess seems to lead nowhere else but to economics again. The “truth” of the film finally leads to money, thus collapsing everything to an overpowering capital, the only meaning in the “meaningless” plot of the film: “The only thing certain is that everyone can be bought, it’s just unclear who’s buying whom and why and in exchange for what and who’s getting the better end of the deal. In the final account the middleman is the only obvious winner, and even he seems clueless” (2005:162f).

The task executed

In the next scene, the mess is transferred from Ben’s body to the scene of interpreting in a hotel. Goran has arranged a reunion with members of his family in a highly formal ceremony in a hotel events hall. The relatives are “parentless parents”, a fact noted down by Ben, and they are not pleased to see their uncle; they prove to be Goran’s nephews and nieces whom he has not seen for 34 years and he wishes to talk to them about something Ben has not understood. And it is one of his nieces that finally enlightens Ben about the cause of their displeasure with their uncle: “Uncle Goran”, she hisses with acidic mockery, ‘is a murderer’” (2005:168). Goran is thought to have killed his brothers and sisters 35 years ago during a period of turmoil in their country. After this fratricide, he is the only member of the family who stays in their homeland, and all the orphans with only one sister, the sole survivor apart from Goran, move to the United States. The gathering has been organized by him, who is now very wealthy, in order to convince them about “the truth”, the fact that the story about the fratricide is a lie. The setting of the event is quite indicative of the rich uncle’s intentions: after 35 years of silence, he chooses to speak to his family from a podium, employing a professional setting and mode of organization, thus giving to himself a position of authority and reserving a position of disempowerment for his audience, who will have to sit down and hear his version of the truth, delivered to them through an interpreter.

Ben’s task finally materializes in the following words: “A couple of dialogue from the movie keeps running through his mind: ‘I’m not who you think I am.’ ‘Exactly, you are who I thought you were.’ ‘Sit down, please everybody’, he speaks loudly, almost enjoying the authority of speaking someone else’s words” (2005:169). The dialogue from the film, with the confusing repetition of the first and second personal pronoun, seems to illustrate the failure of identity and the power games involved in the interaction of this conflict. Ben flows into Goran’s identity so that his task is accomplished, and this identification is further enhanced at the moment of the attack at Goran by two of his nephews, when the former “turns to Ben and says, each word terrifically enunciated, ‘I will need your help now’” (2005:170). The two people on the podium, the speaker and his interpreter, are physically abused by two members of their audience, and this abuse in the case of the interpreter simulates a rape. “The main problem is the boot. First slicing up his thigh, it is now, at this very instant cleaving the translator’s bottom in two and is firmly wedged into an obvious site of insertion” (2005:171). The scene underlines the different forces acting on the historical text at the same time: the speaker, as the only sur-vivor of the “original” past text who can communicate his/story; his sister, the
only other survivor who, however, cannot convey anything in a comprehensible language but only in half legible signs, as she cannot talk and can barely write after a stroke she suffered the previous year; the audience, again as sur-vivors but of a secondary degree, since their version of the story has already been mediated for them through the stories of others (the audience in this case is the outcome of a historical rupture, the subject of a hybrid culture, a cultural translation); the interpreter, as the biased and clueless translator and conveyer of this historic past (he is employed by one of the involved parties); and the dead who are re-called to life, the silent subjects and objects of history, whose “true” narrative has to be revealed.

Apart from the obvious violence against speaker and interpreter by their audience, the scene is also interesting because of the surprising focus on Ben’s role; Ben suddenly becomes “the translator” for the first time in the story, which marks an unexpected detachment on the part of the narrator, and serves as an indication of a twist in the focus of the plot. This is not Ben, the main character of the story any longer, but the translator/interpreter, practicing his trade. Relationships are also reversed; the dominant party of the communication, the ex-cathedra speaker, is deprived of his prevalent position by the dominated audience. His nephews, translated identities of Goran, who is the only father-figure for these “parentless parents” (2005:167) in this (m)other country, may speak only the language of the host country but their appearance marks them out as different, other. So, in a way, the young people as the translated other of the speaker abuse the “original” in an effort to assert their version of the story.

The episode also brings forward a violent break with the linear progression of events: speaker’s address → translation → audience response → reconciliation. And it is not only the progress of the events of the present that is interrupted; it is also the progression of the historical narrative that is broken and left incomplete, in a sudden merging of past and present. His/story cannot be seen in a continuum, alluding to a Benjaminian perspective that “is advocating a non linear historical temporality. For Benjamin, the view of history as a continuum is fundamentally dangerous because it reinforces the ideology of mechanistic progress, which is dangerous no more into whose hands it falls” (Steinberg 1996:92).

However, after this moment of physical abuse, a destructive moment for the gathering, there is a re-construction of the setting and linear progression is re-established. The two nephews involved in the attack leave the room together with all the women and children, while Goran, Ben, and two other nephews are seated close together, and a mediated dialogue develops between the parties involved. The dialogue that follows leads to the final reconciliation of the family:

He [Goran] speaks in a slow monotone: ‘They will not tell their children I killed their parents. I did not.’
‘You wont tell your children he killed your parents. He did not.’ […]
‘He did!’ one of the brothers protests. ‘Bastard!’ […]
Finally Goran removes a checkbook and pen from inside his suit pocket. He writes a check, tears it out, and hands it to Ben. It is written in the amount of $25,000. […] ‘For each family’, Goran says.
‘He wants to give this to every family’, Ben says handing the check to the one with the exaggerated face.
‘For what?’
Ben translates.
‘They will believe me.’
Ben translates.
The brothers whisper to each other, alternately shaking and nodding their related heads.
‘Not enough,’ one rejoins.
Ben translates. (Hasak-Lowy 2005:173-176)

It all comes down to money, then. The ideological battles of history, which led to the murder of Goran’s brothers and sisters, the displacement of their children and the rupture of the family, are now resolved through capital. According to Jonathan Friedman, “[t]he interplay between the world market and cultural identity, between local and global processes, between consumption and cultural strategies, is part of one attempt to discover the logics involved in this apparent chaos” (1990:312). It is through economics that ideology and cultural identity are presented and negotiated. In this context, the role of the mediator/interpreter is not to convey the message(s) of the communicating parties but to represent the dominant ideology of his employer and world economics. Therefore, there is no actual reconciliation of meaning, a rapprochement between the two parties, but an over-coming of history, an absolute disregard of actual events.

Negotiations continue for some time until, in an evident repetition of the film plot, everything is resolved: the “clueless” middleman, Ben,

speaks his best idea in years […]. ‘What if,’ he rubs his unique chin, ‘what if he pays you thirty now and another twenty in five years, but only after he checks with your children that you’re telling them the truth?’ […] ‘What truth?’ one of the brothers challenges. Ben holds his index finger to Goran and speaks to the brothers. ‘That he didn’t kill anyone.’ (Hasak-Lowy 2005:176f, emphasis added)

Distanced from his client after the abusive moment of the brothers’ attack, retaining a façade of self-identity through the use of the third-person pronoun for Goran, Ben manages to fulfill his task, fully empowered to negotiate and manipulate power relations between the interlocutors. However, things are again quite messy as the “rubbing of his unique chin” underlines, and identities and identifications are not as clear as they may seem at first. A clear indication to Ben’s identification with the family is the narrator’s reference to the chin, whose importance as an identity mark is repeatedly stressed in the text since it marks the family as distinctly “other” in the new land. In other words, the interpreter abuses the clearly demarcated boundaries of his role as a neutral agent in the communication.¹³

This entire episode of the interpreting process underlines the complexity of the translator’s task to reconcile the two languages and cultures, but also the past, present and future of the text. This reconciliation is presented in Lowy’s story as a pharmakon (both poison and remedy at the same time).¹⁴ Like the film, this interaction gives no access to “truth”. What is the true story, or rather the true history? Did he or did he not commit fratricide? So, this

¹³ Edwin Gentzler makes an interesting point on the word “abuse” as used by Derrida: “When Derrida uses the term as in a ‘une ‘bonne’ traduction doit toujours abuser’ […] he used it because of the multiplicity of referents associated with the term, including those creative, playful connotations in French, always pointing his form of deconstruction toward the positive, the affirmative, the life-giving. In a typical Derridean rhetorical strategy, there is a kind of double-writing manifest, with abuser here connoting both pleasure and pain, mixing destruction with construction” (2002:202).

¹⁴ The very word pharmakon underlines the power of translation to decide the undecidable as we can see in Derrida’s discussion of Phaedrus, Dissemination, a discussion that “strikes at the very heart of philosophy itself” (Johnson: 1968/1981:xxv).
“truth” is never revealed. The middleman is clueless not just of the language but also of the history and culture of the Other. This ignorance is shared by the narrator and thus transferred to the reader in an endless process of incomprehensibility.

The translator, instead of bridging the gap, seems to reveal the chasm between the parties of communication. The only culture hero and narrator know is the hegemonic culture of global capital through which everything is currently perceived and understood. Starting from the very beginning with the narrator’s reference to Ted’s “not so insignificant, intermittently delivered by bank wire at the command of his healthy as a bull father, who was uninterested in the morbid suspense of wills and impatient sons” (2005:149) inheritance, which again annuls the very meaning of the word inheritance, since quite absurdly the father is still alive and strong and the inheritance money given at his command. Later, culture, politics, education are translated into some form of capital by the narrator, a practice which seems to empty everything of any “true” value or meaning:

He [Ben], too, attended this center of higher learning, which, again cost so much that were his parents to have taken and smartly hidden the money required for tuition, room, board, books, phone, recreational medication, trips home – the four-year total coming in just a few bucks over $140,000 – in a CD, money market, mutual fund, IRA, 401 (k) tax-exclusive investment setting, and just keep their child alive and fed, getting him to deliver papers or pizza or processing data or anything until the age of thirty-five just to avoid debt, he could have retired, more or less, thanks to a bull market, which, essentially, would have made him a millionaire. (2005:151)

Even Ben’s individual history is linked to economics: “[…] the duly past part of his life […] is so only a memory to be doubted. Something to do with potential and promise. Rising overall, unfazed by slight dips. Like the world’s population or a retirement account” (2005:162). But this transcendental signified, it seems, is also devoid of any tangible presence; the narrator refers only to intangible assets that circulate around the globe without ever coming down to something tangible. Even the promise of Goran’s return and a repetition of the whole process further underlines the chasm opening up before the quest for the “truth”:

Goran slowly walks Ben to his car through the crisp air of the parking lot. ‘When I return in five years, I want you to be my blah again.’ ‘Your what?’ ‘My translator.’ ‘Oh. Of course.’ Goran reaches into his breast pocket and hands Ben a check. ‘Thank you.’ The short wealthy man walks away toward an idling car. […] Ben simply nods his convulsing head and mutely smiles his open and closed mouth, unable to remember how one responds to ‘thank you’ in Goran’s language. (2005:177)

In this context, the broken fragments of the vessel never make up a whole. To put it in Paul de Man’s words: “The translation is the fragment of a fragment, is breaking the fragment – so the vessel keeps breaking, constantly – and never reconstitutes it; there was no vessel in the first place, or we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all in-

---

15 I will provide “translation” for these abbreviations and terms, which I deem necessary in the context of a non-economic paper: 1. CD is a Certificate of Deposit (time deposit); 2. “The money market is the market for short-term financial instruments. […] Companies and investors often use money market securities as temporary “parking places” for storing cash”; 3. “A mutual fund is an investment company designed to pool the funds of smaller investors and place them under professional management. A mutual fund allows small investors to diversify their portfolios”; 4. “An IRA - Individual Retirement Account - is a tax-sheltered investment account available to US taxpayers”; 5. “A 401 (k) plan is a deferred compensation plan used for retirement”. All definitions are from Investor Glossary (2012).
tents and purposes there has never been one” (1986:91). So, to return to the *arche* of the argument and Benjamin’s title, *Aufgabe* is both giving and giving up, both an undertaking and a failure at the same time.

**Conclusion: The task of this translator**

What is, then, the task of *this* translator? By transplanting Walter Benjamin’s essay in a literary context, Hasak-Lowy (this translator) also attempts to piece together the shards of Benjaminian thought in order to reflect on the individual’s condition in contemporary society. This effort to “translate” the past of Benjamin’s essay into present reality serves as a link with past philosophical thought developed at a critical historical moment. Hasak-Lowy’s story forces the reader to see translation within the context of Benjamin’s philosophical approach, thus placing it within a historical, political, and cultural frame. By inhabiting all these spaces simultaneously, Lowy’s story, like Benjamin’s approach to translation, plays with traditional boundaries, boundaries between genres, languages, histories, nations, or periods. Benjamin’s essay, as the point of departure, prepares the reader for a major rupture in the traditional divisions between original and translation, past and present, source and target language, and promotes the concept of reconciliation, transcendence of borders and limits.

This translator, then, promotes a dialogue between different discourses (literature, philosophy, history) and between different historic periods that co-exist in the text, thus establishing the sur-vival of Benjamin’s essay in a different context and accomplishing Hasak-Lowy’s task/duty as an heir, “as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival” (Derrida 1985:179).

**Reference**


