DES TOURS DE BABEL

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Joseph F. Graham

ABSTRACT

"Des Tours de Babel" is the most elegant and the most accessible of Derrida's excavations of the Bible. It opens with him contemplating the ruins of Babel (Gen 11:1–9), moves on to Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," and ends with a return to the tower. Here is what he unearths: "the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel...does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequations of one tongue to another,...of language to itself and to meaning...it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes.... In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on.... The 'tower of Babel' does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating.... What the multiplicity of idioms actually limits is not only a 'true' translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression, it is also a structural order, a coherence of construct.... It would be easy and up to a certain point justified to see there the translation of a system in deconstruction."

"Babel": first a proper name, granted. But when we say "Babel" today, do we know what we are naming? Do we know whom? If we consider the sur-vival of a text that is a legacy, the narrative or the myth of the tower of Babel, it does not constitute just one figure among others. Telling at least of the inadequation of one tongue to another, of one place in the encyclopedia to another, of language to itself and to meaning, and so forth, it also tells of the need for figuration, for myth, for tropes, for twists and turns, for translation inadequate to compensate for that which multiplicity denies us. In this sense it would be the myth of the origin of myth, the metaphor of metaphor, the narrative of narrative, the translation of translation, and so on. It would not be the only structure hollowing itself out like that, but it would do so in its own way (itself *almost* untranslatable, like a proper name), and its idiom would have to be saved.

The "tower of Babel" does not merely figure the irreducible multiplicity of tongues; it exhibits an incompletion, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics. What the multiplicity of idioms actually limits is not only a "true" translation, a transparent and adequate interexpression, it is also a structural order, a

coherence of construct. There is then (let us translate) something like an internal limit to formalization, an incompleteness of the constructure. It would be easy and up to a certain point justified to see there the translation of a system in deconstruction.

One should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in which the question of the tongue is raised and into which a discourse on translation is translated.

First: in what tongue was the tower of Babel constructed and deconstructed? In a tongue within which the proper name of Babel could also, by confusion, be translated by "confusion." The proper name Babel, as a proper name, should remain untranslatable, but, by a kind of associative confusion that a unique tongue rendered possible, one thought it translated in that very tongue by a common noun signifying what *we* translate as confusion. Voltaire showed his astonishment in his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, at the *Babel* article:

> I do not know why it is said in *Genesis* that Babel signifies confusion, for *Ba* signifies father in the Oriental tongues, and *Bel* signifies God; Babel signifies the city of God, the holy city. The Ancients gave this name to all their capitals. But it is incontestable that Babel means confusion, either because the architects were confounded after having raised their work up to eighty-one thousand Jewish feet, or because the tongues were then confounded; and it is obviously from that time on that the Germans no longer understand the Chinese; for it is clear, according to the scholar Bochart, that Chinese is originally the same tongue as high German.

The calm irony of Voltaire means that Babel means: it is not only a proper name, the reference of a pure signifier to a single being—and for this reason untranslatable—but a common noun related to the generality of a meaning. This common noun means, and means not only confusion, even though "confusion" has at least two meanings, as Voltaire is aware, the confusion of tongues, but also the state of confusion in which the architects find themselves with the structure interrupted, so that a certain confusion has already begun to affect the two meanings of the word "confusion." The signification of "confusion" is confused, at least double. But Voltaire suggests something else again: Babel means not only confusion in the double sense of the word, but also the name of the father, more precisely and more commonly, the name of God as name of father. The city would bear the name of God the father and of the father of the city that is called confusion. God, the God, would have marked with his patronym a communal space, that city where understanding is no longer possible. And understanding is no longer possible when there are only proper names, and understanding is no longer possible when there are no longer proper names. In giving his name, a name of his choice, in giving all names, the father would be at the origin of language, and that power

would belong by right to God the father. And the name of God the father would be the name of that origin of tongues. But it is also that God who, in the action of his anger (like the God of Böhme or of Hegel, he who leaves himself, determines himself in his finitude and thus produces history), annuls the gift of tongues, or at least embroils it, sows confusion among his sons, and poisons the present (*Gift*-gift). This is also the origin of tongues, of the multiplicity of idioms, of what in other words are usually called mother tongues. For this entire history deploys filiations, generations and genealogies: all Semitic. Before the deconstruction of Babel, the great Semitic family was establishing its empire, which it wanted universal, and its tongue, which it also attempts to impose on the universe. The moment of this project immediately precedes the deconstruction of the tower. I cite two French translations. The first translator stays away from what one would want to call "literality," in other words, from the Hebrew figure of speech for "tongue," where the second, more concerned about literality (metaphoric, or rather metonymic), says "lip," since in Hebrew "lip" designates what we call, in another metonymy, "tongue." One will have to say multiplicity of lips and not of tongues to name the Babelian confusion. The first translator, then, Louis Segond, author of the Segond Bible, published in 1910, writes this:

> Those are the sons of Sem, according to their families, their tongues, their countries, their nations. Such are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their generations, their nations. And it is from them that emerged the nations which spread over the earth after the flood. All the earth had a single tongue and the same words. As they had left the origin they found a plain in the country of Schinear, and they dwelt there. They said to one another: Come! Let us make bricks, and bake them in the fire. And brick served them as stone, and tar served as cement. Again they said Come! Let us build ourselves a city and a tower whose summit touches the heavens, and let us make ourselves a name, so that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth.

I do not know just how to interpret this allusion to the substitution or the transmutation of materials, brick becoming stone and tar serving as mortar. That already resembles a translation, a translation of translation. But let us leave it and substitute a second translation for the first. It is that of Chouraqui. It is recent and wants to be more literal, almost *verbum pro verbo*, as Cicero said should not be done in one of those first recommendations to the translator which can be read in his *Libellus de Optimo Genere Oratorum*. Here it is:

> Here are the sons of Shem
> for their clans, for their tongues,
> in their lands, for their peoples.
> Here are the clans of the sons of Noah for their exploits,
> in their peoples:
> from the latter divide the peoples on earth, after the flood.

And it is all the earth a single lip, one speech.
And it is at their departure from the Orient they find a canyon,
in the land of Shine'ar.
They settle there.
They say, each to his like:
"Come, let us brick some bricks.
Let us fire them in the fire."
The brick becomes for them stone, the tar, mortar.
They say:
"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower.
Its head: in the heavens.
Let us make ourselves a name,
that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth."

What happens to them? In other words, for what does God punish them in giving his name, or rather, since he gives it to nothing and to no one, in proclaiming his name, the proper name of "confusion" which will be his mark and his seal? Does he punish them for having wanted to build as high as the heavens? For having wanted to accede to the highest, up to the Most High? Perhaps for that too, no doubt, but incontestably for having wanted thus to *make a name for themselves*, to give themselves the name, to construct for and by themselves their own name, to gather themselves there ("that we no longer be scattered"), as in the unity of a place which is at once a tongue and a tower, the one as well as the other, the one as the other. He punishes them for having thus wanted to assure themselves, by themselves, a unique and universal genealogy. For the text of Genesis proceeds immediately, as if it were all a matter of the same design: raising a tower, constructing a city, making a name for oneself in a universal tongue which would also be an idiom, and gathering a filiation:

They say:
"Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower.
Its head: in the heavens.
Let us make ourselves a name.
that we not be scattered over the face of all the earth."

YHWH descends to see the city and the tower
that the sons of man have built.
YHWH says:
Yes! A single people, a single lip for all:
that is what they begin to do!...
Come! Let us descend! Let us confound their lips,
man will no longer understand the lip of his neighbor."

Then he disseminates the Sem, and dissemination is here deconstruction:

YHWH disperses them from here over the face of all the earth.
They cease to build the city.
Over which he proclaims his name Bavel, Confusion,

for there, YHWH confounds the lip of all the earth,
and from there YHWH disperses them over the face of all the earth.

Can we not, then, speak of God's jealousy? Out of resentment against that unique name and lip of men, he imposes his name, his name of father; and with this violent imposition he opens the deconstruction of the tower, as of the universal language; he scatters the genealogical filiation. He breaks the lineage. He *at the same time* imposes and forbids translation. He imposes it and forbids it, constrains, but as if to failure, the children who henceforth *will bear* his name, the name that *he* gives to the city. It is from a proper name of God, come from God, descended from God or from the father (and it is indeed said that YHWH, an unpronounceable name, *descends* toward the tower) and by him that tongues are scattered, confounded or multiplied, according to a descendance that in its very dispersion remains sealed by the only name that will have been the strongest, by the only idiom that will have triumphed. Now, this idiom bears within itself the mark of confusion, it improperly means the improper, to wit: Bavel, confusion. Translation then becomes necessary and impossible, like the effect of a struggle for the appropriation of the name, necessary and forbidden in the interval between two absolutely proper names. And the proper name of God (given by God) is divided enough in the tongue, already, to signify also, confusedly, "confusion." And the war that he declares has first raged within his name: divided, bifid, ambivalent, polysemic: God deconstructing. "And he war," one reads in *Finnegans Wake,* and we could follow this whole story from the side of Shem and Shaun. The "he war" does not only, in this place, tie together an incalculable number of phonic and semantic threads, in the immediate context and throughout this Babelian book; it says the declaration of war (in English) of the One who says I am the one who am, and who thus was *(war);* it renders itself untranslatable in its very performance, *at least in the fact* that it is enunciated in more than one language at a time, at least English and German. If even an infinite translation exhausted its semantic stock, it would still translate into *one* language and would lose the multiplicity of "he war." Let us leave for another time a less hastily interrupted reading of this "he war," and let us note one of the limits of theories of translation: all too often they treat the passing from one language to another and do not sufficiently consider the possibility for languages to be implicated *more than two* in a text. How is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated? How is the effect of plurality to be "rendered"? And what of translating with several languages at a time, will that be called translating?

Babel: today we take it as a proper name. Indeed, but the proper name of what and of whom? At times that of a narrative text recounting a story

(mythical, symbolic, allegorical; it matters little for the moment), a story in which the proper name, which is then no longer the title of the narrative, names a tower or a city but a tower or a city that receives its name from an event during which YHWH "proclaims his name." Now, this proper name, which already names at least three times and three different things, also has, this is the whole point, as proper name the function of a common noun. This story recounts, among other things, the origin of the confusion of tongues, the irreducible multiplicity of idioms, the necessary and impossible task of translation, its necessity *as* impossibility. Now, in general one pays little attention to this fact: it is in translation that we most often read this narrative. And in this translation, the proper name retains a singular destiny, since it is not translated in its appearance as proper name. Now, a proper name as such remains forever untranslatable, a fact that may lead one to conclude that it does not strictly belong, for the same reason as the other words, to the language, to the system of the language, be it translated or translating. And yet "Babel," an event in a single tongue, the one in which it appears so as to form a "text," also has a common meaning, a conceptual generality. That it be by way of a pun or a confused association matters little: "Babel" could be understood in one language as meaning "confusion." And from then on, just as Babel is at once proper name and common noun, confusion also becomes proper name and common noun, the one as the homonym of the other, the synonym as well, but not the equivalent, because there could be no question of confusing them in their value. It has for the translator no satisfactory solution. Recourse to apposition and capitalization ("Over which he proclaims his name: Bavel, Confusion") is not translating from one tongue into another. It comments, explains, paraphrases, but does not translate. At best it reproduces approximately and by dividing the equivocation into two words there where confusion gathered in potential, in all its potential, in the internal translation, if one can say that, which works the word in the so-called original tongue. For in the very tongue of the original narrative there is a translation, a sort of transfer, that gives immediately (by some confusion) the semantic equivalent of the proper name which, by itself, as a pure proper name, it would not have. As a matter of fact, this intralinguistic translation operates immediately; it is not even an operation in the strict sense. Nevertheless, someone who speaks the language of Genesis could be attentive to the effect of the proper name in effacing the conceptual equivalent (like *pierre* [rock] in *Pierre* [Peter], and these are two absolutely heterogeneous values or functions); one would then be tempted to say *first* that a proper name, in the proper sense, does not properly belong to the language; it does not belong there, *although and because* its call makes the language possible (what would a language be without the pos-

sibility of calling by a proper name?); consequently it can properly inscribe itself in a language only by allowing itself to be translated therein, in other words, *interpreted* by its semantic equivalent: from this moment it can no longer be taken as proper name. The noun *pierre* belongs to the French language, and its translation into a foreign language should in principle transport its meaning. This is not the case with *Pierre*, whose inclusion in the French language is not assured and is in any case not of the same type. "Peter" in this sense is not a *translation* of *Pierre*, any more than *Londres* is a translation of "London," and so forth. And *second*, anyone whose so-called mother tongue was the tongue of Genesis could indeed understand Babel as "confusion"; that person then effects a *confused* translation of the proper name by its common equivalent without having need for another word. It is as if there were two words there, two homonyms one of which has the value of proper name and the other that of common noun: between the two, a translation which one can evaluate quite diversely. Does it belong to the kind that Jakobson calls intralingual translation or rewording? I do not think so: "rewording" concerns the relations of transformation between common nouns and ordinary phrases. The essay *On Translation* (1959) distinguishes three forms of translation. *Intralingual* translation interprets linguistic signs by means of other signs of the *same* language. This obviously presupposes that one can know in the final analysis how to determine rigorously the unity and identity of a language, the decidable form of its limits. There would then be what Jakobson neatly calls translation "proper," *interlingual* translation, which interprets linguistic signs by means of some other language—this appeals to the same presupposition as intralingual translation. Finally there would be intersemiotic translation or transmutation, which interprets linguistic signs by means of systems of nonlinguistic signs. For the two forms of translation which would not be translations "proper," Jakobson proposes a definitional equivalent and another word. The first he translates, so to speak, by another word: intralingual translation or *rewording.* The third likewise: *intersemiotic* translation or *transmutation.* In these two cases, the translation of "translation" is a definitional interpretation. But in the case of translation "proper," translation in the ordinary sense, interlinguistic and post-Babelian, Jakobson does not translate; he repeats the same word: "interlingual translation or translation proper." He supposes that it is not necessary to translate; everyone understands what that means because everyone has experienced it, everyone is expected to know what is a language, the relation of one language to another and especially identity or difference in fact of language. If there is a transparency that Babel would not have impaired, this is surely it, the experience of the multiplicity of tongues and the

"proper" sense of the word "translation." In relation to this word, when it is a question of translation "proper," the other uses of the word "translation" would be in a position of intralingual and inadequate translation, like metaphors, in short, like twists or turns of translation in the proper sense. There would thus be a translation in the proper sense and a translation in the figurative sense. And in order to translate the one into the other, within the same tongue or from one tongue to another, in the figurative or in the proper sense, one would engage upon a course that would quickly reveal how this reassuring tripartition can be problematic. Very quickly: at the very moment when pronouncing "Babel" we sense the impossibility of deciding whether this name belongs, properly and simply, to *one* tongue. And it matters that this undecidability is at work in a struggle for the proper name within a scene of genealogical indebtedness. In seeking to "make a name for themselves," to found at the same time a universal tongue and a unique genealogy, the Semites want to bring the world to reason, and this reason can signify simultaneously a colonial violence (since they would thus universalize their idiom) and a peaceful transparency of the human community. Inversely, when God imposes and opposes his name, he ruptures the rational transparency but interrupts also the colonial violence or the linguistic imperalism. He destines them to translation, he subjects them to the law of a translation both necessary and impossible; in a stroke with his translatable-untranslatable name he delivers a universal reason (it will no longer be subject to the rule of a particular nation), but he simultaneously limits its very universality: forbidden transparency, impossible univocity. Translation becomes law, duty and debt, but the debt one can no longer discharge. Such insolvency is found marked in the very name of Babel: which at once translates and does not translate itself, belongs without belonging to a language and indebts itself to itself for an insolvent debt, to itself as if other. Such would be the Babelian performance.

    This singular example, at once archetypical and allegorical, could serve as an introduction to all the so-called theoretical problems of translation. But no theorization, inasmuch as it is produced in a language, will be able to dominate the Babelian performance. This is one of the reasons why I prefer here, instead of treating it in the theoretical mode, to attempt to translate in my own way the translation of another text on translation. The preceding ought to have led me instead to an early text by Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" (1916), translated by Maurice de Gandillac (*Mythe et Violence*, Paris: Denoël, 1971). Reference to Babel is explicit there and is accompanied by a discourse on the proper name and on translation. But given the, in my view, overly enigmatic character of that essay, its wealth and its overdetermina-

tions, I have had to postpone that reading and limit myself to "The Task of the Translator" (also translated by Maurice de Gandillac in the same volume). Its difficulty is no doubt no less, but its unity remains more apparent, better centered around its theme. And this text on translation is also the preface to a translation of the *Tableaux parisiens* by Baudelaire, and I refer first to the French translation that Maurice de Gandillac gives us. And yet, translation—is it only a theme for this text, and especially its primary theme?

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." And all that in a discourse multiplying genealogical motifs and allusions—more or less than metaphorical—to the transmission of a family seed. The translator is indebted, he appears to himself as translator in a situation of debt; and his task is to *render*, to render that which must have been given. Among the words that correspond to Benjamin's title *(Aufgabe*, duty, mission, task, problem, that which is assigned, given to be done, given to render), there are, from the beginning, *Wiedergabe, Sinnwiedergabe*, restitution, restitution of meaning. How is such a restitution, or even such an acquittance, to be understood? Is it only to be restitution of meaning, and what of meaning in this domain?

For the moment let us retain this vocabulary of gift and debt, and a debt which could well declare itself insolvent, whence a sort of "transference, " love and hate, on the part of whoever is in a position to translate, is summoned to translate, with regard to the text to be translated (I do not say with regard to the signatory or the author of the original), to the language and the writing, to the bond and the love which seal the marriage between the author of the "original" and his own language. At the center of the essay, Benjamin says of the restitution that it could very well be impossible: insolvent debt within a genealogical scene. One of the essential themes of the text is the "kinship" of languages in a sense that is no longer tributary of nineteenth-century historical linguistics without being totally foreign to it. Perhaps it is here proposed that we think the very possibility of a historical linguistics.

Benjamin has just quoted Mallarmé, he quotes him in French, after having left in his own sentence a Latin word, which Maurice de Gandillac has reproduced at the bottom of the page to indicate that by "genius" he was not translating from German but from the Latin *(ingenium)*. But of course he could not do the same with the third language of this essay, the

French of Mallarmé, whose untranslatability Benjamin had measured. Once again: how is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated? Here is the passage on the insolvent (I quote as always the French translation, being content to include here or there the German word that supports my point):

> Philosophy and translation are not futile, however, as sentimental artists allege. For there exists a philosophical genius, whose most proper characteristic is the nostalgia for that language which manifests itself in translation.
>
>> Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême: penser étant écrire sans accessoires ni chuchotement, mais tacite encore l'immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de proférer les mots qui, sinon, se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.
>
> If the reality that these words of Mallarmé evoke is applicable, in full rigor, to the philosopher, translation, with the seeds [Keimen] that it carries within itself of such a language, is situated midway between literary creation and theory. Its work has lower relief, but it impresses itself just as profoundly on history. If the task of the translator appears in this light, the paths of its accomplishment risk becoming obscure in an all the more impenetrable way. Let us say more: of this task that consists, in the translation, in ripening the seed of a pure language ["den Samen reiner Sprache zur Reife zu bringen"], it seems impossible ever to acquit oneself ["diese Aufgabe…scheint niemals lösbar"]; it seems that no solution would permit defining it ["in keiner Lösung bestimmbar"]. Does not one deprive it of any basis if rendering meaning ceases to be the standard?

Benjamin has, first of all, foregone translating the Mallarmé; he has left it shining in his text like the medallion of a proper name; but this proper name is not totally insignificant; it is merely welded to that whose meaning does not allow transport without damage into another language or into another tongue (and *Sprache* is not translated without loss by either word). And in the text of Mallarmé, the effect of being proper and thus untranslatable is tied less to any name or to any truth of adequation than to the unique occurrence of a performative force. Then the question is posed: does not the ground of translation finally recede as soon as the restitution of meaning ("Wiedergabe des Sinnes") ceases to provide the measure? It is the ordinary concept of translation that becomes problematic: it implied this process of restitution, the task (Aufgabe) was finally to render (wiedergeben) what was first *given*, and what was given was, one thought, the meaning. Now, things become obscure when one tries to accord this value of restitution with that of maturation. On what ground, in what ground, will the maturation take place if the restitution of the meaning given is for it no longer the rule?

The allusion to the maturation of a seed could resemble a vitalist or geneticist metaphor; it would come, then, in support of the genealogical

and parental code which seems to dominate this text. In fact it seems necessary here to invert this order and recognize what I have elsewhere proposed to call the "metaphoric catastrophe": far from knowing first what "life" or "family" mean whenever we use these familiar values to talk about language and translation; it is rather starting from the notion of a language and its "sur-vival" in translation that we could have access to the notion of what life and family mean. This reversal is operated expressly by Benjamin. His preface (for let us not forget: this essay is a preface) circulates without cease among the values of seed, life, and especially "sur-vival." (*Überleben* has an essential relation with *Übersetzen.*) Now, very near the beginning, Benjamin seems to propose a simile or a metaphor—it opens with "just as..."—and right away everything moves in and about *Übersetzen, Übertragen, Überleben:*

> Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the living, without signifying anything for it, a translation proceeds from the original. Indeed not so much from its life as from its survival [Überleben]. For a translation comes after the original and, for the important works that never find their predestined translator at the time of their birth, it characterizes the stage of their survival [Fortleben, this time, sur-vival as continuation of life rather than as life post mortem]. Now, it is in this simple reality, without any metaphor ["in völlig unmetaphorischer Sachlichkeit"], that it is necessary to conceive the ideas of life and survival [Fortleben] for works of art.

And according to a scheme that appears Hegelian, in a very circumscribed passage, Benjamin calls us to think life, starting from spirit or history and not from "organic corporeality" alone. There is life at the moment when "sur-vival" (spirit, history, works) exceeds biological life and death: "It is rather in recognizing for everything of which there is history and which is not merely the setting for history that one does justice to this concept of life. For it is starting from history, not from nature..., that the domain of life must finally be circumscribed. So is born for the philosopher the task [Aufgabe] of comprehending all natural life starting from this life, of much vaster extension, that is the life of history."

From the very title—and for the moment I stay with it—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 (nor, be it said in passing, and the question is not negligible, that of the translatoress). Benjamin does not say the task or the problem of translation. He names the subject of translation, as an indebted subject, obligated by a duty, already in the position of heir, entered as survivor in a genealogy, as survivor or agent of sur-vival. The sur-vival of works, not authors. Perhaps the sur-vival of authors' names and of signatures, but not of authors.

Such sur-vival gives more of life, more than a surviving. The work does not simply live longer, it lives more and better, beyond the means of

its author. Would the translator then be an indebted receiver, subject to the gift and to the given of an original? By no means. For several reasons, including the following: the bond or obligation of the debt does not pass between a donor and a donee but between two texts (two "productions" or two "creations"). This is understood from the opening of the preface, and if one wanted to isolate theses, here are a few, as brutally as in any sampling:

1. The task of the translator does not announce itself or follow from a *reception*. The theory of translation does not depend for the essential on any theory of reception, even though it can inversely contribute to the elaboration and explanation of such a theory.

2. Translation does not have as essential mission any *communication*. No more than the original, and Benjamin maintains, secure from all danger of dispute, the strict duality between the original and the version, the translated and the translating, even though he shifts their relation. And he is interested in the translation of poetic or sacred texts, which would here yield the essence of translation. The entire essay extends between the poetic and the sacred, returning from the first to the second, the one that indicates the ideal of all translation, the purely transferable: the intralinear version of the sacred text, the model or ideal *(Urbild)* of any translation at all possible. Now, this is the second thesis: for a poetic text or a sacred text, communication is not the essential. This putting into question does not directly concern the communicative structure of language but rather the hypothesis of a communicable content that could be strictly distinguished from the linguistic act of communication. In 1916, the critique of semiotism and of the "bourgeois conception" of language was already directed against that distribution: means, object, addressee. "There is no content of language." What language first communicates is its "communicability" ("On Language as Such," trans. M. de Gandillac, 85). Will it be said that an opening is thus made toward the performative dimension of utterances? In any case this warns us against precipitation: isolating the contents and theses in "The Task of the Translator" and translating it otherwise than as the signature of a kind of proper name destined to ensure its sur-vival as a work.

3. If there is indeed between the translated text and the translating text a relation of "original" to version, it could not be *representative* or *reproductive*. Translation is neither an image nor a copy.

These three precautions now taken (neither reception, nor communication, nor representation), how are constituted the debt and the genealogy of the translator? Or first, how those of that which is *to-be-translated*, of the to-be-translated?

Let us follow the thread of life or sur-vival wherever it communicates with the movement of kinship. When Benjamin challenges the viewpoint of reception, it is not to deny it all pertinence, and he will undoubtedly have done much to prepare for a theory of reception in literature. But he wants first to return to the authority of what he still calls "the original," not insofar as it produces its receiver or its translators, but insofar as it requires, mandates, demands or commands them in establishing the law. And it is the structure of this demand that here appears most unusual. Through what does it pass? In a literary—more strictly speaking in this case, "poetic"—text it does not pass through the said, the uttered, the communicated, the content or the theme. And when, in this context, Benjamin still says "communication" or "enunciation" (Mitteilung, Aussage), it is not about the act but about the content that he visibly speaks: "But what does a literary work [Dichtung] 'say'? What does it communicate? Very little to those who understand it. What it has that is essential is not communication, not enunciation."

The demand seems thus to pass, indeed to be formulated, through the form. "Translation is a form," and the law of this form has its first place in the original. This law first establishes itself, let us repeat, as a demand in the strong sense, a requirement that delegates, mandates, prescribes, assigns. And as for this law as demand, two questions can arise; they are different in essence. First question: in the sum total of its readers, can the work always find the translator who is, as it were, capable? Second question and, says Benjamin, "more properly" (as if this question made the preceding more appropriate, whereas, we shall see, it does something quite different): "by its essence does it [the work] bear translation and if so—in line with the signification of this form—, does it require translation?"

The answers to these two questions could not be of the same nature or the same mode. Problematic in the first case, not necessary (the translator capable of the work may appear or not appear, but even if he does not appear, that changes nothing in the demand or in the structure of the injunction that comes from the work), the answer is properly apodictic in the second case: necessary, a priori, demonstrable, absolute because it comes from the internal law of the original. The original requires translation even if no translator is there, fit to respond to this injunction, which is at the same time demand and desire in the very structure of the original. This structure is the relation of life to sur-vival. This requirement of the other as translator, Benjamin compares it to some unforgettable instant of life: it is lived as unforgettable, it is unforgettable even if in fact forgetting finally wins out. It will have been unforgettable—there is its essential significance, its apodictic essence; forgetting happens to this unforget-

tableness only by accident. The requirement of the unforgettable—which is here constitutive—is not in the least impaired by the finitude of memory. Likewise the requirement of translation in no way suffers from not being satisfied, at least it does not suffer in so far as it is the very structure of the work. In this sense the *surviving* dimension is an a priori—and death would not change it at all. No more than it would change the requirement *(Forderung)* that runs through the original work and to which only "a thought of God" can respond or correspond *(entsprechen)*. Translation, the desire for translation, is not thinkable without this *correspondence* with a thought of God. In the text of 1916, which already accorded the task of the translator, his Aufgabe, with the response made to the gift of tongues and the gift of names ("Gabe der Sprache," "Gebung des Namens"), Benjamin named God at this point, that of a correspondence authorizing, making possible or guaranteeing the correspondence between the languages engaged in translation. In this narrow context, there was also the matter of the relations between language of things and language of men, between the silent and the speaking, the anonymous and the nameable, but the axiom held, no doubt, for all translation: "the objectivity of this translation is guaranteed in God" (trans. M. de Gandillac, 91). The debt, in the beginning, is fashioned in the hollow of this "thought of God."

Strange debt, which does not bind anyone to anyone. If the structure of the work is "sur-vival," the debt does not engage in relation to a hypothetical subject-author of the original text—dead or mortal, the dead man, or "dummy," of the text—but to something else that represents the formal law in the immanence of the original text. Then the debt does not involve restitution of a copy or a good image, a faithful representation of the original: the latter, the survivor, is itself in the process of transformation. The original gives itself in modifying itself; this gift is not an object given; it lives and lives on in mutation: "For in its survival, which would not merit the name if it were not mutation and renewal of something living, the original is modified. Even for words that are solidified there is still a postmaturation."

Postmaturation *(Nachreife)* of a living organism or a seed: this is not simply a metaphor, either, for the reasons already indicated. In its very essence, the history of this language is determined as "growth," "holy growth of languages."

4. If the debt of the translator commits him neither with regard to the author (dead insofar as his text has a structure of survival even if he is living) nor with regard to a model which must be reproduced or represented, to what or to whom is he committed? How is this to be named, this what or who? What is the proper name if not that of the author finite,

dead or mortal of the text? And who is the translator who is thus commit-
ted, who perhaps finds himself *committed* by the other before having
committed himself? Since the translator finds himself, as to the survival of
the text, in the same situation as its finite and mortal producer (its
"author"), it is not he, not he himself as a finite and mortal being, who is
committed. Then who? It is he, of course but in the name of whom or
what? The question of proper names is essential here. Where the act of the
living mortal seems to count less than the sur-vival of the text in the
translation—translated and translating—it is quite necessary that the sig-
nature of the proper noun be distinguished and not be so easily effaced
from the contract or from the debt. Let us not forget that Babel names a
struggle for the sur-vival of the name, the tongue or the lips.

From its height Babel at every instant supervises and surprises my
reading: I translate, I translate the translation by Maurice de Gandillac of a
text by Benjamin who, prefacing a translation, takes it as a pretext to say
to what and in what way every translator is committed—and notes in
passing, an essential part of his demonstration, that there could be no
translation of translation. This will have to be remembered.

Recalling this strange situation, I do not wish only or essentially to
reduce my role to that of a passer or passerby. Nothing is more serious
than a translation. I rather wished to mark the fact that every translator is
in a position to speak *about* translation, in a place which is more than any
not second or secondary. For if the structure of the original is marked by
the requirement to be translated, it is that in laying down the law the
original begins by indebting itself *as well* with regard to the translator. The
original is the first debtor, the first petitioner; it begins by lacking and by
pleading for translation. This demand is not only on the side of the con-
structors of the tower who want to make a name for themselves and to
found a universal tongue translating itself by itself; it also constrains the
deconstructor of the tower: in giving his name, God also appealed to
translation, not only between the tongues that had suddenly become
multiple and confused, but first *of his name*, of the name he had pro-
claimed, given, and which should be translated as confusion to be under-
stood, hence to let it be understood that it is difficult to translate and so to
understand. At the moment when he imposes and opposes his law to that
of the tribe, he is also a petitioner for translation. He is also indebted. He
has not finished pleading for the translation of his name even though he
forbids it. For Babel is untranslatable. God weeps over his name. His text
is the most sacred, the most poetic, the most originary, since he creates a
name and gives it to himself, but he is left no less destitute in his force and
even in his wealth; he pleads for a translator. As in *La folie du jour* by
Maurice Blanchot, the law does not command without demanding to be

read, deciphered, translated. It demands transference (Übertragung and Übersetzung and Überleben). The *double bind* is in the law. Even in God, and it is necessary to follow rigorously the consequence: *in his name.*

Insolvent on both sides, the double indebtedness passes between names. It surpasses a priori the bearers of the names, if by that is understood the mortal bodies which disappear behind the sur-vival of the name. Now, a proper noun does and does not belong, we said, to the language, not even, let us make it precise now, to the corpus of the text to be translated, of the to-be-translated.

The debt does not involve living subjects but names at the edge of the language or, more rigorously, the trait which contracts the relation of the aforementioned living subject to his name, insofar as the latter keeps to the edge of the language. And this trait would be that of the to-be-translated from one language to the other, from this edge to the other of the proper name. This language contract among several languages is absolutely singular. First of all, it is not what is generally called a language contract: that which guarantees the institution of *one* language, the unity of its system, and the social contract which binds a community in this regard. On the other hand it is generally supposed that in order to be valid or to institute anything at all, a contract must take place in a single language or appeal (for example, in the case of diplomatic or commercial treaties) to a transferability already given and without remainder: there the multiplicity of tongues must be absolutely dominated. Here, on the contrary, a contract between two foreign languages as such engages to render possible a translation which *subsequently* will authorize every sort of contract in the originary sense. The signature of this singular contract needs no written document or record: it nevertheless takes place as trace or as trait, and this place takes place even if its space comes under no empirical or mathematical objectivity.

The topos of this contract is exceptional, unique, and practically impossible to think under the ordinary category of contract: in a classical code it would have been called transcendental, since in truth it renders possible every contract in general, starting with what is called the language contract within the limits of a single idiom. Another name, perhaps, for the origin of tongues. Not the origin of language but of languages— before language, languages.

The translation contract, in this transcendental sense, would be the contract itself, the absolute contract, the contract form of the contract, that which allows a contract to be what it is.

Will one say that the kinship among languages presupposes this contract or that the kinship provides a first occasion for the contract? One

recognizes here a classic circle. It has always begun to turn whenever one asks oneself about the origin of languages or society. Benjamin, who often talks about the kinship among languages, never does so as a comparatist or as a historian of languages. He is interested less in families of languages than in a more essential and more enigmatic connection, an affinity which is not sure to precede the trait or the contract of the to-be-translated. Perhaps even this kinship, this affinity *(Verwandtschaft)*, is like an alliance, by the contract of translation, to the extent that the sur-vivals which it associates are not natural lives, blood ties, or empirical symbioses.

> This development, like that of a life original and elevated, is determined by a finality original and elevated. Life and finality—their correlation apparently evident, yet almost beyond the grasp of knowledge, only reveals itself when the goal, in view of which all singular finalities of life act, is not sought in the proper domain of that life but rather at a level more elevated. All finalized vital phenomena, like their very finality, are, after all, finalized not toward life but toward the expression of its essence, toward the representation *[Darstellung]* of its signification. Thus translation has finally as goal to express the most intimate relation among languages.

A translation would not seek to say this or that, to transport this or that content, to communicate such a charge of meaning, but to re-mark the affinity among the languages, to exhibit its own possibility. And that, which holds for the literary text or the sacred text, perhaps defines the very essence of the literary and the sacred, at their common root. I said "re-mark" the affinity among the languages to name the strangeness of an "expression" ("to express the most intimate relation among the languages"), which is neither a simple "presentation" nor simply anything else. In a mode that is solely anticipatory, annunciatory, almost prophetic, translation renders *present* an affinity that is never present in this presentation. One thinks of the way in which Kant at times defines the relation to the sublime: a presentation inadequate to that which is nevertheless presented. Here Benjamin's discourse proceeds in twists and turns:

> It is impossible that it [the translation] be able to reveal this hidden relation itself, that it be able to restitute *[herstellen]* it; but translation can represent [darstellen] that relation in actualizing it in its seed or in its intensity. And this representation of a signified ["Darstellung eines Bedeuteten"] by the endeavor, by the seed of its restitution, is an entirely original mode of representation, which has hardly any equivalent in the domain of nonlinguistic life. For the latter has, in analogies and signs, types of reference *[Hindeutung]* other than the intensive, that is to say anticipatory, annunciatory *[vorgreifende, andeutende]* actualization. But the relation we are thinking of, this very intimate relation among the languages, is that of an original convergence. It consists in this: the languages are not foreign to one another, but, a priori and abstracted from all historical relations, are related to one another in what they mean.

The entire enigma of that kinship is concentrated here. What is meant by "what they mean"? And what about this presentation in which nothing is presented in the ordinary mode of presence?

At stake here are the name, the symbol, the truth, the letter.

One of the basic foundations of the essay, as well as of the 1916 text, is a theory of the name. Language is determined starting from the word and the privilege of naming. This is, in passing, a very strong if not very conclusive assertion: "the originary element of the translator" is the word and not the sentence, the syntactic articulation. As food for thought, Benjamin offers a curious "image": the sentence *(Satz)* would be "the wall in front of the language of the original," whereas the word, the word for word, literality (Wörtlichkeit), would be its "arcade." Whereas the wall braces while concealing (it is *in front of* the original), the arcade supports while letting light pass and the original show (we are not far from the Parisian passages). This privilege of the word obviously supports that of the name and with it what is proper to the proper name, the stakes and the very possibility of the translation contract. It opens onto the *economic* problem of translation, whether it be a matter of economy as the law of the proper or of economy as a quantitative relation (is it translating to transpose a proper name into several words, into a phrase or into a description, and so forth?).

There is some to-be-translated. From both sides it assigns and makes contracts. It commits not so much authors as proper names at the edge of the language, it essentially commits neither to communicate nor to represent, nor to keep an already signed commitment, but rather to draw up the contract and to give birth to the pact, in other words to the *symbolon*, in a sense that Benjamin does not designate by this term but suggests, no doubt with the metaphor of the amphora, let us say, since from the start we have suspected the ordinary sense of metaphor with the ammetaphor.

If the translator neither restitutes nor copies an original, it is because the original lives on and transforms itself. The translation will truly be a moment in the growth of the original, which will complete itself *in* enlarging itself. Now, it has indeed to be, and it is in this that the "seminal" logic must have imposed itself on Benjamin, that growth not give rise to just any form in just any direction. Growth must accomplish, fill, complete *(Ergänzung* is here the most frequent term). And if the original calls for a complement, it is because at the origin it was not there without fault, full, complete, total, identical to itself. From the origin of the original to be translated there is fall and exile. The translator must redeem (erlösen), absolve, resolve, in trying to absolve himself of his own debt, which is at bottom the same—and bottomless. "To redeem in his own tongue that pure language exiled in the foreign tongue, to liberate by transposing this

pure language captive in the work, such is the task of the translator."
Translation is a poetic transposition *(Umdichtung)*. We will have to exam-
ine the essence of the "pure language" that it liberates. But let us note for
the moment that this liberation itself presupposes a freedom of the trans-
lator, which is itself none other than relation to that "pure language"; and
the liberation that it operates, eventually in transgressing the limits of the
translating language, in transforming it in turn, must extend, enlarge, and
make language grow. As this growth comes also to complete, as it is sym-
bolon, it does not reproduce: it adjoins in adding. Hence this double simile
(Vergleich), all these turns and metaphoric supplements: (1) "Just as the
tangent touches the circle only in a fleeting manner and at a single point,
and just as it is this contact, not the point, that assigns to the tangent the
law according to which it pursues to infinity its course in a straight line,
so the translation touches the original in a fleeting manner and only at an
infinitely small point of meaning, to follow henceforth its proper course,
according to the law of fidelity in the liberty of language movement."
Each time that he talks about the contact *(Berührung)* between the bodies
of the two texts in the process of translation, Benjamin calls it "fleeting"
(flüchtig). On at least three occasions, this "fleeting" character is empha-
sized, and always in order to situate the contact with meaning, the in-
finitely small point of meaning which the languages barely brush ("The
harmony between the languages is so profound here [in the translations of
Sophocles by Hölderlin] that the meaning is only touched by the wind of
language in the manner of an Eolian lyre"). What can an infinitely small
point of meaning be? What is the measure to evaluate it? The metaphor
itself is at once the question and the answer. And here is the other
metaphor, the metamphora, which no longer concerns extension in a
straight and infinite line but enlargement by adjoining along the broken
lines of a fragment. (2) "For, just as the fragments of the amphora, if one is
to be able to reconstitute the whole, must be contiguous in the smallest
details, but not identical to each other, so instead of rendering itself simi-
lar to the meaning of the original, the translation should rather, in a
movement of love and in full detail, pass into its own language the mode
of intention of the original: thus, just as the debris become recognizable as
fragments of the same amphora, original and translations become recog-
nizable as fragments of a larger language."

Let us accompany this movement of love, the gesture of this loving
one *(liebend)* that is at work in the translation. It does not reproduce, does
not restitute, does not represent; as to the essential, it does not *render* the
meaning of the original except at that point of contact or caress, the in-
finitely small of meaning. It extends the body of languages, it puts lan-
guages into symbolic expansion, and symbolic here means that, however

little restitution there be to accomplish, the larger, the new vaster aggregate, has still to *reconstitute* something. It is perhaps not a whole, but it is an aggregate in which openness should not contradict unity. Like the urn which lends its poetic topos to so many meditations on word and thing, from Hölderlin to Rilke and Heidegger, the amphora is one with itself though opening itself to the outside—and this openness opens the unity, renders it possible, and forbids it totality. Its openness allows receiving and giving. If the growth of language must also reconstitute without representing, if that is the symbol, can translation lay claim to the truth? Truth—will that still be the name of that which still lays down the law for a translation?

Here we touch—at a point no doubt infinitely small—the limit of translation. The pure untranslatable and the pure transferable here pass one into the other—and it is the truth, "itself materially."

The word "truth" appears more than once in "The Task of the Translator." We must not rush to lay hold of it. It is not a matter of truth for a translation in so far as it might conform or be faithful to its model, the original. Nor any more a matter, either for the original or even for the translation, of some adequation of the language to meaning or to reality, nor indeed of the representation to something. Then what is it that goes under the name of truth? And will it be that new?

Let us start again from the "symbolic." Let us remember the metaphor, or the ammetaphor: a translation espouses the original when the two adjoined fragments, as different as they can be, complete each other so as to form a larger tongue in the course of a sur-vival that changes them both. For the native tongue of the translator, as we have noted, is altered as well. Such at least is my interpretation—my translation, my "task of the translator." It is what I have called the translation contract: hymen or marriage contract with the promise to produce a child whose seed will give rise to history and growth. A marriage contract in the form of a seminar. Benjamin says as much, in the translation the original becomes larger; it grows rather than reproduces itself—and I will add: like a child, its own, no doubt, but with the power to speak on its own which makes of a child something other than a product subjected to the law of reproduction. This promise signals a kingdom which is at once "promised and forbidden where the languages will be reconciled and fulfilled." This is the most Babelian note in an analysis of sacred writing as the model and the limit of all writing, in any case of all Dichtung in its being-to-be-translated. The sacred and the being-to-be-translated do not lend themselves to thought one without the other. They produce each other at the edge of the same limit.

This kingdom is never reached, touched, trodden by translation. There is something untouchable, and in this sense the reconciliation is only promised. But a promise is not nothing, it is not simply marked by what it lacks to be fulfilled. As a promise, translation is already an event, and the decisive signature of a contract. Whether or not it be honored does not prevent the commitment from taking place and from bequeathing its record. A translation that manages, that manages to promise reconciliation, to talk about it, to desire it or make it desirable—such a translation is a rare and notable event.

Here two questions before going closer to the truth. Of what does the untouchable consist, if there is such a thing? And why does such a metaphor or ammetaphor of Benjamin make me think of the hymen, more visibly of the wedding gown?

1. The always intact, the intangible, the untouchable *(unberührbar)* is what fascinates and orients the work of the translator. He wants to touch the untouchable, that which remains of the text when one has extracted from it the communicable meaning (point of contact which is, remember, infinitely small), when one has transmitted that which can be transmitted, indeed taught: what I do here, after and thanks to Maurice de Gandillac, knowing that an untouchable remnant of the Benjaminian text will also remain intact at the end of the operation. Intact and virgin in spite of the labor of translation, however efficient or pertinent that may be. Pertinency has no bearing here. If one can risk a proposition in appearance so absurd, the text will be even more virgin after the passage of the translator, and the hymen, sign of virginity, more jealous of itself after the other hymen, the contract signed and the marriage consummated. Symbolic completeness will not have taken place to its very end and yet the promise of marriage will have come about—and this is the task of the translator, in what makes it very pointed as well as irreplaceable.

But again? Of what does the untouchable consist? Let us study again the metaphors or the ammetaphors, the Übertragungen which are translations and metaphors of translation, translations (Übersetzungen) of translation or metaphors of metaphor. Let us study all of these Benjaminian passages. The first figure which comes in here is that of the core and the shell, the fruit and the skin *(Kern, Frucht/Schale)*. It describes in the final analysis the distinction that Benjamin would never want to renounce or even bother to question. One recognizes a core (the original as such) by the fact that it can bear further translating and retranslating. A translation, *as such*, cannot. Only a core, because it resists the translation it attracts, can offer itself to further translating operations without letting itself be exhausted. For the relation of the content to the language, one would also say of the substance to the form, of the signified to the signifier—it hardly

matters here (in this context Benjamin opposes tenor, *Gehalt*, and tongue or language, *Sprache*)—differs from the original text to the translation. In the first, the unity is just as dense, tight, adherent as between the fruit and its skin, its shell or its peel. Not that they are inseparable—one should be able to distinguish them by rights—but they belong to an organic whole, and it is not insignificant that the metaphor here be vegetal and natural, naturalistic:

> This kingdom it [the original in translation] never fully attains, but it is there that is found what makes translating more than communicating. More precisely one can define this essential core as that which, in the translation, is not translatable again. For, as much as one may extract of the communicable in order to translate it, there always remains this untouchable towards which is oriented the work of the true translator. It is not transmissible, as is the creative word of the original ["übertragbar wie das Dichterwort des Originals"], for the relation of this tenor to the language is entirely different in the original and in the translation. In the original, tenor and language form a determinate unity, like that of the fruit and the skin.

Let us dissect a bit more the rhetoric of this sequence. It is not certain that the essential "core" and the "fruit" designate the same thing. The essential core, that which in the translation is not translatable again, is not the tenor, but this adherence between the tenor and the language, between the fruit and the skin. This may seem strange or incoherent (how can a core be situated between the fruit and the skin?). It is necessary no doubt to think that the core is first the hard and central unity that holds the fruit to the skin, the fruit to itself as well; and above all that, at the heart of the fruit, the core is "untouchable," beyond reach and invisible. The core would be the first metaphor of what makes for the unity of the two terms in the second metaphor. But there is a third, and this time one without a natural provenance. It concerns the relation of the tenor to the language in the translation and no longer in the original. This relation is different, and I do not think I give in to artifice by insisting on this difference in saying that it is precisely that of artifice to nature. What in fact is it that Benjamin notes, as if in passing, for rhetorical or pedagogical convenience? That "the language of the translation envelops its tenor like a royal cape with large folds. For it is the signifier of a language superior to itself and so remains, in relation to its own tenor, inadequate, forced, foreign." That is quite beautiful, a beautiful translation: white ermine, crowning, scepter, and majestic bearing. The king has indeed a body (and it is not here the original text but that which constitutes the tenor of the translated text), but this body is only promised, announced and dissimulated by the translation. The clothes fit but do not cling strictly enough to the royal person. This is not a weakness; the best translation resembles this royal cape. It remains separate from the body to which it is neverthe-

less conjoined, wedding it, not wedded to it. One can of course embroider on this cape, on the necessity of this Übertragung, of this metaphoric translation of translation. For example, one can oppose this metaphor to that of the shell and the core just as one would oppose technology to nature. An article of clothing is not natural; it is a fabric and even—another metaphor of metaphor—a text, and this text of artifice appears precisely on the side of the symbolic contract. Now, if the original text is demand for translation, then the fruit, unless it be the core, insists upon becoming the king or the emperor who will wear new clothes: under its large folds, *in weiten Falten*, one will imagine him naked. No doubt the cape and the folds protect the king against the cold or natural aggressions; but first, above all, it is, like his scepter, the eminent visibility of the law. It is the index of power and of the power to lay down the law. But one infers that what counts is what comes to pass under the cape, to wit, the body of the king, do not immediately say the phallus, around which a translation busies its tongue, makes pleats, molds forms, sews hems, quilts, and embroiders. But always amply floating at some distance from the tenor.

2. More or less strictly, the cape weds the body of the king, but as for what comes to pass under the cape, it is difficult to separate the king from the royal couple. This is the one, this couple of spouses (the body of the king and his gown, the tenor and the tongue, the king and the queen) that lays down the law and guarantees every contract from this first contract. That is why I thought of a wedding gown. Benjamin, we know, does not push matters in the direction that I give to my translation, reading him always already in translation. More or less faithfully I have taken some liberty with the tenor of the original, as much as with its tongue, and again with the original that is also for me, now, the translation by Maurice de Gandillac. I have added another cape, floating even more, but is that not the final destination of all translation? At least if a translation is destined to arrive.

Despite the distinction between the two metaphors, the shell and the cape (the royal cape, for he said "royal" where others could have thought a cape sufficed), despite the opposition of nature and art, there is in both cases a *unity* of tenor and tongue, natural unity in the one case, symbolic unity in the other. Simply in the translation the unity signals a (metaphorically) more "natural" unity; it promises a tongue or language more originary and almost sublime, sublime to the distended extent that the promise itself—to wit, the translation—there remains inadequate (*unangemessen*), violent and forced (*gewaltig*), and foreign (*fremd*). This "fracture" renders useless, even "forbids," every Übertragung, every "transmission," exactly as the French translation says: the word also plays, like a transmission, with transferential or metaphorical displace-

ment. And the word *Übertragung* imposes itself again a few lines down: if the translation "transplants" the original onto another terrain of language "ironically" more definitive, it is to the extent that it could no longer be displaced by any other "transfer" (Übertragung) but only "raised" *(erheben)* anew on the spot "in other parts." There is no translation of translation; that is the axiom without which there would not be "The Task of the Translator." If one were to violate it, and one must not, one would touch the untouchable of the untouchable, to wit, that which guarantees to the original that it remains indeed the original.

This is not unrelated to truth. Truth is apparently beyond every Über-tragung and every possible Übersetzung. It is not the representational correspondence between the original and the translation, nor even the primary adequation between the original and some object or signification exterior to it. Truth would be rather the *pure language* in which the meaning and the letter no longer dissociate. If such a place, the taking place of such an event, remained undiscoverable, one could no longer, even by right, distinguish between an original and a translation. In maintaining this distinction at all cost, as the original given of every translation contract (in the quasi-transcendental sense we discussed above), Benjamin repeats the foundation of the law. In so doing he exhibits the possibility of copyright for works and author, the very possibility by which actual law claims to be supported. This law collapses at the slightest challenge to a strict boundary between the original and the version, indeed to the identity or to the integrity of the original. What Benjamin says about this relation between original and translation is also found translated in a language rather wooden but faithfully reproduced as to its meaning at the opening of all legal treatises concerning the actual law of translations. And then whether it be a matter of the general principles of the difference original/translation (the latter being "derived" from the former) or a matter of the translations of translation. The translation of translation is said to be "derived" from the original and not from the first translation. Here are some excerpts from the French law; but there does not seem to be from this point of view any opposition between it and the rest of Western law (nevertheless, a study of comparative law should also concern the translation of legal texts). As we shall see, these propositions appeal to the polarity expression/expressed, signifier/signified, form/substance. Benjamin also began by saying: translation is a form, and the symbolizer/symbolized split organizes his whole essay. Now, in what way is this system of oppositions indispensable to this law? Because only it allows, starting from the distinction between original and translation, acknowledgment of some originality in the translation. This originality is determined, and this is one of the many classic philosophemes at the

foundation of this law, as originality of *expression*. Expression is opposed to content, of course, and the translation, which is not supposed to touch the content, must be original only in its language as *expression;* but expression is also opposed to what French jurists call the *composition* of the original. In general one places composition on the side of form, but here the form of expression in which one can acknowledge some originality to the translator, and for this reason the rights of author-translator, is only the form of linguistic expression, the choice of words in the language, and so forth, but nothing else of the form. I quote Claude Colombet, *Proprieté littéraire et artistique* (Paris: Dalloz, 1976), from which I excerpt only a few lines, in accordance with the law of March 11, 1957, recalled at the opening of the book and "authorizing...only analyses and short quotations for the purpose of example or illustration," because "every representation or reproduction, integral or partial, made without the consent of the author or of his beneficiaries or executors, is illegal," constituting "therefore an infraction punishable under articles 425 and following of the Penal Code."

54.—Translations are works which are original only by expression; [very paradoxical restriction: the cornerstone of copyright, it is indeed that only the form can become property, and not the ideas, the themes, the contents, which are common and universal property. (Compare all of chapter 1 in this book, *L'absence de protection des idées par le droit d'auteur.*) If a first consequence is good, since it is this form that defines the originality of the translation, another consequence could be ruinous, for it would lead to abandoning that which distinguishes the original from the translation if, excluding expression, it amounts to a distinction of substance. Unless the value of composition, however lax it may be, were still to indicate the fact that between the original and the translation the relation is neither of expression nor of content but of something else beyond these oppositions. In following the difficulty of the jurists—sometimes comic in its casuistic subtlety—so as to draw the consequences from axioms of the type "Copyright does not protect ideas; but these can be, sometimes indirectly, protected by means other than the law of March 11, 1957" (ibid., 21), one measures better the historicity and conceptual fragility of this set of axioms] article 4 of the law cites them among the protected works; in fact it has always been admitted that a translator demonstrates originality in the choice of expressions to render best in one language the meaning of the text in another language. As M. Savatier says, "The genius of each language gives the translated work its own physiognomy; and the translator is not a simple workman. He himself participates in a derived creation for which he bears his own responsibility"; it is that in fact translation is not the result of an automatic process; by the choices he makes among several words, several expressions, the translator fashions a work of the mind; but, of course, he could never modify the composition of the work translated, for he is bound to respect that work.

In his language, Desbois says the same thing, with some additional details:

Derived works which are original in expression. 29. The work under considera-
tion, to be *relatively original* [emphasized by Desbois], need not bear the im-
print of a personality at once in composition and expression, like adaptations.
It is enough that the author, while following step by step the development of
a preexistent work, have performed a personal act in the expression: article 4
attests to this, since, in a nonexhaustive enumeration of derived works, it
puts *translations* in the place of honor. "Traduttore, traditore," the Italians are
wont to say, in a bit of wit, which, like every coin, has two sides: if there are
bad translators, who multiply misreadings, others are cited for the perfection
of their task. The risk of a mistake or an imperfection has as counterpart the
perspective of an authentic version, which implies a perfect knowledge of the
two languages, an abundance of judicious choices, and thus a creative effort.
Consulting a dictionary suffices only for mediocre candidates to the baccalau-
reate: the conscientious and competent translator "gives of himself" and
creates just like the painter who makes a copy of a model.—The verification of
this conclusion is furnished by the comparison of several translations of one
and the same text: each may differ from the others without any one contain-
ing a misreading; the variety in modes of expression for a single thought
demonstrates, with the possibility of choice, that the task of the translator
gives room for manifestations of personality. [*Le droit d'auteur en France*
(Paris: Dalloz, 1978)]

One will note in passing that the *task of the translator,* confined to the duel
of languages (never more than two languages), gives rise only to a
"creative effort" (effort and tendency rather than achievement, artisan
labor rather than artistic performance), and when the translator "creates,"
it is like a painter who copies his model (a ludicrous comparison for many
reasons; is there any use in explaining?). The recurrence of the word
"task" is remarkable enough in any case, for all the significations that it
weaves into a network, and there is always the same evaluative interpre-
tation: duty, debt, tax, levy, toll, inheritance and estate tax, nobiliary
obligation, but labor midway to creation, infinite task, essential incomple-
tion, as if the presumed creator of the original were not—he too—
indebted, taxed, obligated by another text, and a priori translating.

Between the transcendental law (as Benjamin repeats it) and the actual
law as it is formulated so laboriously and at times so crudely in treatises
on copyright for author or for works, the analogy can be followed quite
far, for example in that which concerns the notion of derivation and the
translations of translations: these are always derived from the original and
not from previous translations. Here is a note by Desbois:

The translator will not even cease to fashion personal work when he goes to
draw advice and inspiration from a preceding translation. We will not refuse
the status of author for a work that is derived, *in relation to anterior transla-
tions,* to someone who would have been content to choose, among several
versions already published, the one that seemed to him the most adequate to
the original: going from one to the other, taking a passage from this one, an-
other from that one, he would create a new work, by the very fact of the
combination, which renders his work different from antecedent productions.

He has exercised creativity, since his translation reflects a new form and re-
sults from comparisons, from choices. The translator would still deserve a
hearing in our opinion, even if his reflection had led him to the same result as
a predecessor, whose work, by supposition, he would not have known: his
unintentional replica, far from amounting to plagiarism, would bear the mark
of his personality, would present a "subjective novelty," which would call for
protection. The two versions, accomplished separately and each without
knowledge of the other, gave rise, separately and individually, to manifesta-
tions of personality. *The second will be a work derived vis-à-vis the work that has
been translated, not vis-à-vis the first.* [ibid., 41; my emphasis in the last sen-
tence]

Of this right to the truth, what is the relation?

Translation promises a kingdom to the reconciliation of languages.
This promise, a properly symbolic event adjoining, coupling, marrying
two languages like two parts of a greater whole, appeals to a language of
the truth ("Sprache der Wahrheit"). Not to a language that is true, ade-
quate to some exterior content, but to a true tongue, to a language whose
truth would be referred only to itself. It would be a matter of truth as
authenticity, truth of act or event which would belong to the original
rather than to the translation, even if the original is already in a position
of demand or debt. And if there were such authenticity and such force of
event in what is ordinarily called a translation, it is that it would produce
itself in some fashion like an original work. There would thus be an origi-
nal and inaugural way of indebting oneself; that would be the place and
date of what is called an original, a work.

To translate well the intentional meaning of what Benjamin means to
say when he speaks of the "language of the truth," perhaps it is necessary
to understand what he regularly says about the "intentional meaning" or
the "intentional aim" ("Intention der Meinung," "Art des Meinens"). As
Maurice de Gandillac reminds us, these are categories borrowed from the
scholastics by Brentano and Husserl. They play a role that is important if
not always very clear in "The Task of the Translator."

What is it that seems intended by the concept of intention (Meinen)?
Let us return to the point where in the translation there seems to be an-
nounced a kinship among languages, beyond all resemblence between an
original and its reproduction and independently of any historical filiation.
Moreover, kinship does not necessarily imply resemblence. With that
said, in dismissing the historical or natural origin, Benjamin does not
exclude, in a wholly different sense, consideration of the origin in general,
any more than a Rousseau or a Husserl did in analogous contexts and
with analogous movements. Benjamin specifies quite literally: for the
most rigorous access to this kinship or to this affinity of languages, "the
concept of origin [*Abstammungsbegriff*] remains indispensable." Where,
then, is this original affinity to be sought? We see it announced in the

plying, replying, co-deploying of intentions. Through each language something is intended which is the same and yet which none of the languages can attain separately. They can claim, and promise themselves to attain it, only by coemploying or codeploying their intentional modes, "the whole of their complementary intentional modes." This codeployment toward the whole is a replying because what it intends to attain is "the pure language" ("die reine Sprache"), or the pure tongue. What is intended, then, by this co-operation of languages and intentional *modes* is not transcendent to the language; it is not a reality which they would besiege from all sides, like a tower that they would try to surround. No, what they are aiming at intentionally, individually and jointly, in translation is the language itself as a Babelian event, a language that is not the universal language in the Leibnizian sense, a language which is not the natural language that each remains on its own either; it is the being-language of the language, tongue or language *as such,* that unity without any self-identity, which makes for the fact that there are languages and that they are languages.

These languages relate to one another in translation according to an unheard-of mode. They complete each other, says Benjamin; but no other completeness in the world can represent this one, or that symbolic complementarity. This singularity (not representable by anything in the world) comes no doubt from the intentional mode or from what Benjamin tries to translate in a scholastico-phenomenological language. Within the same intentional aim it is necessary to distinguish rigorously between the thing intended, the intended (Gemeinten), and the mode of intention ("die Art des Meinens"). As soon as he sights the original contract of languages and the hope for the "pure tongue," the task of the translator excludes the intended or leaves it between brackets.

The mode of intention alone assigns the task of translation. Every "thing," in its presumed self-identity (for example, bread *itself*) is intended by way of different modes in each language and in each text of each language. It is among these modes that the translation should seek, produce or reproduce, a complementarity or a "harmony." And since to complete or complement does not amount to the summation of any worldly totality, the value of harmony suits this adjustment, and what can here be called the accord of tongues. This accord lets the pure language, and the being-language of the language, resonate, announcing it rather than presenting it. As long as this accord does not take place, the pure language remains hidden, concealed *(verborgen),* immured in the nocturnal intimacy of the "core." Only a translation can make it emerge.

Emerge and above all develop, make grow. Always according to the same motif (in appearance organicist or vitalist), one could then say that

each language is as if atrophied in its isolation, meager, arrested in its growth, sickly. Owing to translation, in other words to this linguistic supplementarity by which one language gives to another what it lacks, and gives it harmoniously, this crossing of languages assures the growth of languages, even that "holy growth of language" "unto the messianic end of history." All of that is announced in the translation process, through "the eternal sur-vival of languages" ("am ewigen Fortleben der Sprachen") or "the infinite rebirth [Aufleben] of languages." This perpetual reviviscence, this constant regeneration (Fort- and Auf-leben) by translation is less a revelation, revelation itself, than an annunciation, an alliance and a promise.

This religious code is essential here. The sacred text marks the limit, the pure even if inaccessible model, of pure transferability, the ideal starting from which one could think, evaluate, measure the essential, that is to say poetic, translation. Translation, as holy growth of languages, announces the messianic end, surely, but the sign of that end and of that growth is "present" (gegenwärtig) only in the "knowledge of that distance, in the Entfernung, *the remoteness* that relates us to it. One can know this remoteness, have knowledge or a presentiment of it, but we cannot overcome it. Yet it puts us in contact with that "language of the truth" which is the "true language" ("so ist diese Sprache der Wahrheit—die wahre Sprache"). This contact takes place in the mode of "presentiment," in the "intensive" mode that renders present what is absent, that allows remoteness to approach as remoteness, *fort:da.* Let us say that the translation is the experience, that which is translated or experienced as well: experience is translation.

The to-be-translated of the sacred text, its pure transferability, that is what would give *at the limit* the ideal measure for all translation. The sacred text assigns the task to the translator, and it is sacred *inasmuch as* it announces itself as transferable, simply transferable, to-be-translated, which does not always mean immediately translatable, in the common sense that was dismissed from the start. Perhaps it is necessary to distinguish here between the transferable and the translatable. Transferability pure and simple is that of the sacred text in which meaning and literality are no longer discernible as they form the body of a unique, irreplaceable, and untransferable event, "materially the truth." Never are the call for translation, the debt, the task, the assignation, more imperious. Never is there anything more transferable, yet by reason of this indistinction of meaning and literality (Wörtlichkeit), the pure transferable can announce itself, give itself, present itself, let itself be translated as untranslatable. From this limit, at once interior and exterior, the translator comes to receive all the signs of remoteness (Entfernung) which guide him on his

infinite course, at the edge of the abyss, of madness and of silence: the last works of Hölderlin as translations of Sophocles, the collapse of meaning "from abyss to abyss," and this danger is not that of accident, it is transferability, it is the law of translation, the to-be-translated as law, the order given, the order received—and madness waits on both sides. And as the task is impossible at the approaches to the sacred text which assigns it to you, the infinite guilt absolves you immediately.

That is what is named from here on Babel: the law imposed by the name of God who in one stroke commands and forbids you to translate by showing *and* hiding from you the limit. But it is not only the Babelien situation, not only a scene or a structure. It is also the status and the event of the Babelian text, of the text of Genesis (a unique text in this regard) as sacred text. It comes under the law that it recounts and translates in an exemplary way. It lays down the law it speaks about, and from abyss to abyss it deconstructs the tower, and every turn, twists and turns of every sort, in a rhythm.

What comes to pass in a sacred text is the occurrence of a *pas de sens.* And this event is also the one starting from which it is possible to think the poetic or literary text which tries to redeem the lost sacred and there translates itself as in its model. *Pas de sens*—that does not signify poverty of meaning but no meaning that would be itself, meaning, beyond any "literality." And right there is the sacred. The sacred surrenders itself to translation, which devotes itself to the sacred. The sacred would be nothing without translation, and translation would not take place without the sacred; the one and the other are inseparable. In the sacred text "the meaning has ceased to be the divide for the flow of language and for the flow of revelation." It is the absolute text because in its event it communicates nothing, it says nothing that would make sense beyond the event itself. That event melds completely with the act of language, for example with prophecy. It is literally the literality of its tongue, "pure language." And since no meaning bears detaching, transferring, transporting, or translating into another tongue as such (as meaning), it commands right away the translation that it seems to refuse. It is transferable and untranslatable. There is only letter, and it is the truth of pure language, the truth as pure language.

This law would not be an exterior constraint; it grants a liberty to literality. In the same event, the letter ceases to oppress insofar as it is no longer the exterior body or the corset of meaning. The letter also translates itself of itself, and it is in this self-relation of the sacred body that the task of the translator finds itself engaged. This situation, though being one of pure limit, does not exclude—quite the contrary—gradations, virtuality,

interval and in-between, the infinite labor to rejoin that which is neverthe-
less past, already given, even here, between the lines, already signed.

How would you translate a signature? And how would you refrain,
whether it be Yahweh, Babel, Benjamin when he signs right next to his last
word? But literally, and between the lines, it is also the signature of Mau-
rice de Gandillac that to end I quote in posing my question: can one quote
a signature? "For, to some degree, all the great writings, but to the highest
point sacred Scripture, contain between the lines their virtual translation.
The interlinear version of the sacred text is the model or ideal of all trans-
lation."

Translator's Note

Translation is an art of compromise, if only because the problems of trans-
lation have no one solution and none that is fully satisfactory. The best
translation is merely better than the worst to some extent, more or less.
Compromise also precludes consistency. It would have been possible, and
it once seemed plausible, to maintain regular equivalents at least for those
terms that figure prominently in the argument. But the result was not
worth the sacrifice. There was consolation for so much effort to so little
effect in that whatever we did, we were bound to exhibit the true princi-
ples of translation announced in our text. And so this translation is ex-
emplary to that extent. To the extent that we were guided in translation,
the principles were also those found in the text. Accordingly, a silhouette
of the original appears for effect in many words and phrases of the trans-
lation.

Publication of the French text is also significant in telling of our situa-
tion. Among the many differences in this translation, a few appear
already in the original.

The quotations from Walter Benjamin are translated from the French,
not the German. The biblical passages are also translated from their
French versions, since Derrida works from translations in both cases.

Here are some of the problems for which I found solutions least satis-
factory:

"Des Tours de Babel." The title can be read in various ways. *Des*
means "some"; but it also means "of the," "from the," or "about the."
Tours could be towers, twists, tricks, turns, or tropes, as in a "turn" of
phrase. Taken together, *des* and *tours* have the same sound as *détour*, the
word for detour. To mark that economy in language the title has not been
changed.

langue/langage. It is difficult to mark this difference in English where
"language" covers both. Whenever possible, "tongue" has been used for

langue, and "language" only in those cases that are clearly specific rather than generic. *Langage* is then translated as "language" in the singular and without modifier, though not always. The German *Sprache* introduces further complications.

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.

performance. The French has not the primarily dramatic connotation of the English but rather the sense of prowess and success; its use here also relates to the "performative" of speech acts.

pas-de-sens. With this expression Derrida combines the *pas* of negation with the *pas* of step in a most curious figure. My English suggested a skip.

De ce droit à la vérité quel est le rapport? This sentence could be translated by any and all of the following: What is the relation between this law and the truth? What is the gain from this law to the truth? What is the relation between this right to the truth and all the rest?