

**THE TASK OF WALTER BENJAMIN'S TRANSLATORS:
REFLECTIONS ON THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGE VERSIONS
OF *DAS PASSAGEN-WERK* (*THE ARCADES PROJECT*)***

Christopher Rollason

Metz, Francia

christopher.rollason@europarl.europa.eu

This article offers an overview of the various language versions of Walter Benjamin's epic work *Das Passagen-Werk* (*The Arcades Project*) and draws a number of conclusions in relation to the theory and practice of translation and to Benjamin's own writings on the subject, notably 'The Task of the Translator'.

Keywords: *Walter Benjamin, translation*

Este artículo ofrece una vista panorámica de las varias versiones lingüísticas de la obra maestra de Walter Benjamin *Das Passagen-Werk* (*Libro de los pasajes*), sacando a continuación algunas conclusiones relativas a la teoría y práctica de la traducción y a los escritos traductológicos del propio Benjamin, en particular 'La tarea del traductor'.

Palabras Clave: *Walter Benjamin, traducción*

I

It is somewhat paradoxical that Walter Benjamin, who is by now all but universally recognised as one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century, is also a name cited with reverence in the academic field of Translation Studies - even though he produced only a sliver of reflections on the subject. There are, indeed, only two frequently cited texts in which Benjamin considers the subject: the early, esoteric essay 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' ('Über die Sprache überhaupt und über die Sprache des Menschen', 1916), and the very well-known piece 'The Task of the

Translator' ('Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers', 1923). From these two slim texts comes Benjamin's surprising fame as a theorist of translation, concerning which we may note two interesting points: first, that the later essay is actually linked to the practice of translation, since it was originally published as Benjamin's preface to his own translation into German of Charles Baudelaire's poem-sequence *Tableaux Parisiens*¹); and second, that since by no means all those who write on Walter Benjamin know his native language, German, his writings *on translation* are more often than not quoted *in translation* (English, Spanish, Italian or whatever). All this may usefully alert the readers of his work to the importance of translation, as an indispensable means of communication of ideas, and, at the same time, to the need for theoretical reflection on what is in no sense an unproblematic or value-free activity. In this brief study, we shall first examine the key elements of Benjamin's concept of translation, and then look in detail at certain aspects of the different language versions of his posthumous masterpiece, the study of nineteenth-century Paris centring on the arcades that is *Das Passagen-Werk*.

II

In 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', Benjamin argues, as a philosopher, in favour of an ontological equality of source and translated texts. As one commentator, Diego Fernández, puts it, 'human languages, in Benjamin's conception of language, maintain a relationship of affinity - not through being like each other or similar to each other, but through kinship'². Translation thus becomes a matter not of similarity or identity (translated text copies source text) but of affinity in difference (translated text and source text are two objects, separate yet akin and equal in value). The 1916 essay affirms: 'Translation attains its full meaning in the realisation that every evolved language ... can be considered as a translation of all the others'³, perceiving translation as a succession not of similarities but of transformations, and thus pointing towards a vision of source and translated text as ontological equals. Benjamin here argues against the idea of a translation as a mere simulacrum of the original, adumbrating a counter-model of difference in equality: 'a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making

both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel¹⁴.

Benjamin's vision of equality between source and translated texts is closely bound up with an antithesis which, though hardly a new invention, has received crucial attention in Translation Studies in our day, namely that between the *domestic* and the *foreign*, or, to use the somewhat inelegant prevailing terms, 'domestication' and 'foreignisation'. In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin endorses the views of an earlier commentator, Rudolf Pannwitz, who, writing in 1917, declared: 'Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Greek, Hindi, English. (...) The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be profoundly affected by the foreign tongue. (...) [Rather], he must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language'¹⁵. In this context, Benjamin especially applauds Friedrich Hölderlin's German translations of Sophocles, as being exemplary of Pannwitz's recommended method.

This Benjamin-Pannwitz position looks both forwards and backwards, to Friedrich Schleiermacher in the early nineteenth century and Lawrence Venuti in our day. In his 1813 essay 'On the Different Methods of Translating', Schleiermacher, the translator into German of the complete works of Plato, argued that as far as translation strategy is concerned 'there are only two possibilities. Either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him; or he leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him'¹⁶. He strongly preferred the former option - i.e. the translator highlights the otherness of the translated text, by 'striving to adhere so closely to the foreign text as his own language allows'¹⁷. Schleiermacher argues that if this method forces the reader to make more effort and may yield translations that appear 'harsh and stiff'¹⁸, it is far superior to the other, less demanding approach. The latter, aiming at 'lightness and naturalness of style'¹⁹ and seeking to 'spare its reader all exertion and toil'²⁰, smooths over the alien features of the foreign-language text, insouciantly omits or replaces whole passages, and risks occluding the

differences between what we would now call source and target languages (and the cultures behind them). Today, Schleiermacher's notion of the 'two methods' has been taken up by a whole school of latter-day translation theorists who have named them, respectively, 'foreignisation' (seen as good) and 'domestication' (seen as bad). The high priest here is the Italian-American translator and translation scholar Lawrence Venuti, who is famously fierce in his opposition to what Schleiermacher termed 'lightness and naturalness' and Venuti himself calls 'fluency'. Venuti has, indeed, linked Benjamin to the earlier German writer, seeing him as 'reviving Schleiermacher's notion of foreignising translating'¹¹. For Venuti, a translation should not read as if it were an original, but should bear the visible signs of its translatedness. In a text of 2004, he defines the bipolar terms as follows: 'Fluency masks a domestication of the foreign text that is appropriative and potentially imperialistic ... It can be countered by "foreignising" translation that registers the irreducible differences of the foreign text'.¹² Venuti's aim - to denaturalise translation and ensure it does not become a mere act of textual appropriation - may be seen, controversial as it is, as a means of seeking that equality between original and translation to which Benjamin aspired.

III

It should, certainly, be of interest to both Benjamin students and translation scholars to consider what links may emerge from examining his masterpiece, *Das Passagen-Werk*, and his ideas concerning translation, in the context of both his original text and its various other language versions. Drafted between 1927 and 1940 and left incomplete (and long undiscovered) after its author's tragic death, *Das Passagen-Werk* finally saw publication in Benjamin's native Germany only in 1982. The manuscripts that became the published book are the collected fruit of his painstaking investigations in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, and consist of a long sequence of fragments, albeit interrelated and organised according to a master plan. The volume as we have it appears as a compromise between two opposite concepts of writing - the finished work and the discrete fragment - mediated by the key image of the constellation, which for Benjamin signifies interconnectedness as a ruling principle¹³. A large part of Benjamin's text actually consists of blocks of quotations from other writers, mostly

nineteenth-century, in either German or French (the French extracts, which are very numerous, are left in the original and *not* translated); these quotations, generally brief, are arranged in sections, and are interspersed throughout with segments of critical commentary, again for the most part brief, by Benjamin himself. This practice is respected in the published German version, and the result is what might be called a linguistically bi-coloured or piebald text, with abundant passages in French interleaved with others in German. Benjamin's original is, then, *not* a bilingual text, even if some have called it so. It should, rather, be called a macaronic text - that is, one which operates on the lines of the medieval carols which alternate Latin and English (as in the well-known 'In Dulci Jubilo': 'Ubi sunt gaudia/If that they be not there?', etc). We do not know, of course, exactly what the finished book would have looked like, nor whether Benjamin would have supplied German translations for his French quotations or preferred to assume a bilingual reader.

The original text of *Das Passagen-Werk* is, then, in reality not so much German as German/French. Meanwhile and as things stand, there exist, to the present writer's knowledge, seven other language versions of the book apart from the original. One, the French version (1989, reissued 2002), bears, as we shall stress below, a relationship to the original which is not entirely that of a translation. The remaining five can all be considered translations proper. Chronologically, the first - interestingly enough, preceding the French and English versions - is the Italian rendition, first published in 1986 and reissued in revised form in 2000. In its footsteps have followed translations into Japanese (1993), English (1999 and a shade belatedly), and Spanish, Portuguese and Korean (all 2005). The titles chosen for Benjamin's work vary, and none of the European ones literally translates *Das Passagen-Werk*¹⁴. The Spanish and Portuguese titles make the volume a *book*, the English, more tentatively, a *project*; the French version calls it a *book* but adds the explicatory "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (a title originating in that of one of Benjamin's own "exposés" for the project¹⁵, as included in the various editions of *Das Passagen-Werk*). The two Italian editions have different titles, the first being, again, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century", but with the subtitle: 'Projects, notes and materials 1937-1949', thus pointing up the manuscript's work-in-progress character, while the second is "The "Passages" of

Paris", the word 'passages' being retained in French. The evident uncertainty over how to title the book reflects the complex and genre-problematic nature of Benjamin's investigations.

IV

How should these different language versions of Benjamin's work be placed in relation to the author's own views on translation? Here one needs to note the, certainly, peculiar textual nature of the original text of *Das Passagen-Werk*. Since Benjamin's German editors chose not to translate the French passages, the notion of a "German original" or "German edition" is something of a misnomer. The text of *Das Passagen-Werk* as it stands can only be understood in full by a reader equally conversant with German and French - as if, provocatively, arguing the impossibility of translation by refusing it. To the present writer's knowledge, no-one has yet undertaken a rendition of the French passages into German, an act which would, though, at last produce a full German version of Benjamin's masterpiece, and one may wonder whether since 1999 some German readers may not actually preferred to consult and use the English version, at least for the quotations from French. It is if, provocatively, Benjamin's text were arguing the impossibility of translation by refusing it. As it stands, *Das Passagen-Werk* is an unintended but eloquent graphic illustration on Benjamin's part of the ontological equality of translation (French) and original (German), as argued in "On Language as Such and On the Language of Man". At the same time, the notion of bringing reader closer to text rather than text closer to reader - the Benjamin-Pannwitz concept of "deepen[ing one's] language by means of the foreign language", corresponding to Schleiermacher's "mov[ing] the reader toward [the author]", is, for the French extracts, pushed to the extreme of bringing the reader so close to the original that the original is, quite simply, not translated at all.

Problems of a different nature are posed by the French edition (translator: Jean Lacoste), which officially bills itself as a translated text in the conventional sense, even though swathes of it, interleaved with the translated material, in reality form a kind of discontinuous French-language original within the text. The title-page declares the book to be "traduit de l'allemand" ("translated from the German"), but

the "avertissement du traducteur" (translator's note) admits that "un grand nombre" ("a great number") of Benjamin's original quotations are in French. The relationship between these two statements is not explored anywhere in the volume's critical apparatus. It is, though, to be hoped that French readers will be aware that in the quotations from Baudelaire, Hugo, Fourier et al. they are in all cases reading the original texts and not retro-translations from the German. From the viewpoint of translation theory, the book's French passages certainly bring the text as close as possible to the reader, and the domestication issue can hardly be said to arise for those passages at all (they do not need to be adapted to "home", since they come from home already), only to the parts translated from German. If the German/French original is a *visible* hybrid or macaronic original, the French version of *Das Passagen-Werk* is an *invisible* hybrid, a collage of translation and original.

In contrast to both the German and French editions, the English (or American) version (translators: Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin) is an ontologically straightforward, non-hybrid, homogeneous textual phenomenon. In the conventional way, it translates everything, from both German and French, into English: the same is of course the case for the Spanish, Portuguese, Italian Japanese and Korean editions, but it is the English one that most needs distinguishing from the German and French editions, since inevitably it will also be read, quoted and taken as a reference point by native speakers of other languages, especially those which the book is not yet translated into. As regards matters of translation technique, the "Translators' Foreword" states that the task was divided between the two translators on a language basis, Eiland taking the German and McLaughlin the French, and that for the literary extracts previously existing translations were used wherever possible¹⁶. Here this version may stand as a model for future translations into other languages. In terms of translation theory, the English version is fully open to the domestication/foreignisation debate, though with the proviso that the text has been transferred not from *one* other culture but from *two*, and translation thus becomes not so much a dialogue as a triologue.

Similar considerations apply, for the most part, to the five other existing translations, which will not be discussed in detail here. We may, though, note that 2005 saw, with both the Spanish and

Portuguese versions seeing the light of day, a major extension of the accessibility of Benjamin's book, which is now, notably, available in their country's main official language to virtually all the inhabitants of both Americas, North and South; and that with the Korean edition appearing in the same year to join the Japanese version, a significant part of East Asia is now also open to the ideas of *Das Passagen-Werk*. Translation thus facilitates the very necessary globalisation of Benjamin's ideas.

V

Concerning future translations into new languages (Russian? Chinese? Hindi? Bengali?), one may wonder what strategies are likely to be followed by those confided with the Herculean task of rendering the entirety of *Das Passagen-Werk*. As with many though not all of the existing versions, there is a good cause for having it done by two translators, or by a team (the Italian translation, in particular, is the product of a complex exercise in teamwork). After all, not all Germanists are French scholars, and vice versa. Understanding Benjamin's study in all its detail calls for an expert knowledge of nineteenth-century history (social and political), literature and philosophy, as well of technical areas such as architecture and engineering, not to mention the topography of Paris, and here recourse to specialists is vital and, indeed, the team method may very likely prove preferable. A further question remains in the air: as has happened in the past with, for example, the translation of Freud into Portuguese, will some publishers of future translations opt for the indirect method and propose working from the English version, rather than taking the more rigorous but more difficult route of seeking out parallel experts in French and German? If that happens, how far will the gain in accessibility from the existence of new translations be vitiated by the departure, inevitable in an indirect translation, from Benjamin's own principle of the ontological equality of languages?

Das Passagen-Werk is one of the great books of the twentieth century, and its message of interrelatedness, relayed through Benjamin's crucial image of the constellation, speaks eloquently to our own, networked century. It is crucial that Benjamin's text be made available in as many languages as possible. At the same time, given the importance and influence of Benjamin's own writings (brief though

they are) on translation, it seems desirable that his translators should be aware of his theoretical postulates and the relation to them of the text of *Das Passagen-Werk* itself. The present essay is offered as an initial contribution to a debate which, it is hoped, will be enriched in the future by further translations, into more languages, of Walter Benjamin's vital, eloquent and constellar masterpiece.

APPENDIX: EDITIONS AND TRANSLATIONS OF *DAS PASSAGEN-WERK*

A. Versions

- GERMAN VERSION – MACARONIC ORIGINAL -
GERMAN/FRENCH

Das Passagen-Werk [written 1927-40, published 1982]. Edited by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1982.

- FRENCH VERSION: PART-TRANSLATION/PART-
ORIGINAL

Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle: Le Livre des passages. Translated by Jean Lacoste. 1989. Reissued, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002.

B. Translations

- ENGLISH

The Arcades Project. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999.

- ITALIAN

1) *Parigi, capitale del XIX secolo. Progetti, appunti e materiali 1927-1940*. Translated by: Renato Solmi, Antonella Moscati, Massimo De Carolis, Giuseppe Russo, Gianni Carchia and Francesco Porzio. Edited by Giorgio Agamben. Turin: Einaudi, 1986.

2) *I 'passages' di Parigi*. Revised version of the earlier translation. Revised by Hellmut Riediger and edited by Daniele La Rosa. Vol. IX of Benjamin, *Opere complete* (general editor, Enrico Ganni). Turin: Einaudi, 2000.

- JAPANESE

Translated by Imamura Hitoshi and others. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten Publishing, 1993.

- KOREAN

Translated by Hyung Jun Cho. Seoul: Saemulgyul Publishing House, 2005.

- PORTUGUESE

O livro das passagens. Translated by Irene Aron. Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Editora da UFMG (Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais), 2005.

- SPANISH

Libro de los pasajes. Translated by Isidro Herrera, Luis Fernández and Fernando Guerrero. Madrid: Akal, 2005.

NOTES

¹ It may be added that the version of 'The Task of the Translator' generally used by English-speaking readers (that translated by Harry Zohn) is, as Stephen Rendall ('A Note on Harry Zohn's Translation') has shown, not entirely error-free (although the errors are not so great as to affect the text's general theoretical drift).

² Fernández, *Informe del tiempo*. Original: 'las lenguas humanas, bajo una concepción benjaminiana de la lengua, guardan una relación de parentesco ... no por su parecido, por su semejanza, sino por una familiaridad'.

- ³ Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', 117.
- ⁴ Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', 78.
- ⁵ Rudolf Pannwitz, *Die Krisis der Europäischen Kultur (The Crisis of European Culture, 1917)*, quoted in Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator', 80-81. Benjamin praises Pannwitz's remarks as being, *ex æquo* with certain observations of Goethe, 'the best comment on the theory of translation that has been published in Germany' (80). Pannwitz (1881-1969), philosopher and poet, was himself a translator of Baudelaire. He is also credited with being one of the first to use the term 'postmodern'.
- ⁶ Schleiermacher, 'On the Different Methods of Translating', 49.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.
- ¹¹ See Venuti's commentary in *The Translation Studies Reader*, 72.
- ¹² Venuti, '1990s and Beyond', 334.
- ¹³ For a more general discussion and interpretation of *The Arcades Project*, see my own study of 2002 (Rollason, 'The Passageways of Paris').
- ¹⁴ I have no information on the Japanese and Korean titles.
- ¹⁵ See Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 14-27.
- ¹⁶ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, xiii-xiv.

WORKS CITED

- Benjamin, W. 1979 (written 1916, first published 1955). 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' [written 1916]. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. In Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*. London: New Left Books, 107-123.
- Benjamin, W. 1973 (first published 1923). 'The Task of the Translator' [introduction to Charles Baudelaire, *Tableaux Parisiens*, trans. Benjamin]. Trans. Harry Zohn. In Benjamin, *Illuminations*. London: Collins (Fontana), 69-82.
- Fernández, D. 2005. *Informe del Tiempo: Sobre la temporalidad de la cita en Walter Benjamin y la (in)temporalidad de lo inconsciente en Sigmund Freud*. Thesis. Santiago (Chile): Universidad Diego Portales. On-line at: <www.wbenjamin.org/fernandez.html>.

- Rendall, S. 2004. 'A Note on Harry Zohn's Translation [of Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"]'. In Venuti, Lawrence, ed, *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 83-85.
- Rollason, C. 2002. 'The Passageways of Paris: Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and Contemporary Cultural Debate in the West'. In Christopher Rollason and Rajeshwar Mittapalli, eds., *Modern Criticism*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 262-296; rev. version on-line at: www.wbenjamin.org/passageways.html.
- Schleiermacher, F. 2004 (first published 1813). 'On the Different Methods of Translating'. Trans. Susan Bernofsky. In Venuti, Lawrence, ed.. *The Translation Studies Reader*. 2nd ed., New York and London: Routledge. 43-63.
- Venuti, L. ed. 2004. *Translation Studies Reader*. 2nd ed., New York and London: Routledge.
- Venuti, L. '1990s and Beyond'. In Venuti, Lawrence (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2004. 325-335.