

Benjamin's Baudelaire: Translation and modern experience

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Abstract

This article focusses on Walter Benjamin's approach to the experience of modernity through his long-term engagement with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin translated Baudelaire and produced a theoretical reflection on translation based on this experience in his essay 'The Task of the Translator'. Years later, he would place Baudelaire at the centre of his attempt to reconstruct the prehistory of modernity in his great unfinished work *The Arcades Project*. This article brings to light the relationship between translating and interpreting Baudelaire in Benjamin's work, attempting to recover a systematicity in his thought that escapes from traditional disciplinary borders. In order to do so, it reads Benjamin's essay on 'The Task of the Translator' in light of major issues that can only be clarified with reference to his later adoption of historical materialism and, conversely, it approaches Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire as the writer of modern life as a revision of philosophical concerns that were first approached in his metaphysics of language and translation. A concluding section explores how such an interpretation relates to a materialist physiognomics which puts language and translation at the heart of a critique of modernity.

Keywords

Charles Baudelaire, experience, modernity, translation, Walter Benjamin

...there is a philosophical genius that is characterized by a yearning for that language which manifests itself in translations. (Benjamin, 1996b: 259)

Introduction

This article focusses on Walter Benjamin's approach to the experience of modernity through his long-term engagement with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire. Benjamin (1996b) translated Baudelaire and produced a theoretical reflection on translation based

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on this experience in his famous essay 'The Task of the Translator'. Years later, he would place Baudelaire at the centre of his attempt to reconstruct the prehistory of modernity in Paris, capital of the 19th century, in his great unfinished work *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999e).

In spite of the proliferation of interpretations, it is striking how Benjamin's early undertaking of translating Baudelaire and his late project of interpreting Baudelaire have not been considered as fundamentally connected. Translation studies scholars have repeatedly approached one of Benjamin's most cryptic essays, 'The Task of the Translator', without relating it to Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire, even failing to ponder on how Benjamin's thought experienced significant changes in later years which bear on the interpretation of this early piece.¹ Sociologists have focussed on Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire for an articulation of modern experience and a theory of modernity without pausing to reflect on how the experience of translating Baudelaire feeds into this interpretation and, more generally, on the significance of Benjamin's approach to language for such an undertaking. Given sociology's overwhelming silence on matters regarding multilingualism and translation, its lack of attention to Benjamin's practice and reflection on translation is not surprising. More puzzling is how even the most sophisticated and sustained engagement with 'The Task of the Translator', Antoine Berman's (2018) *The Age of Translation*, a book length commentary on Benjamin's key essay, fails to consider how Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire relates to what Berman (2018) calls the underlying systematicity of Benjamin's broken writing (p. 32).

This article brings to light the relationship between translating and interpreting Baudelaire in Benjamin's work, attempting to recover a systematicity in his thought that escapes from traditional disciplinary borders and conventional distinctions between translation, writing and critique. In order to do so, it reads Benjamin's key text on 'The Task of the Translator' in light of major issues that can only be clarified with reference to his later adoption of historical materialism, actualising Benjamin's early essay so as to dispel partial interpretations which are still dominant in the secondary literature (section 1). Conversely, it approaches Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire as the writer of modern life as a revision of philosophical concerns that were first developed in his metaphysics of language and translation (section 2). A concluding section explores how Benjamin's approach relates to a materialist physiognomics which puts language and translation at the heart of a critique of modernity. Such an undertaking must be seen as a key contribution to what I have elsewhere characterised as a translational sociology, which espouses a non-reductive approach to the multiplicity of languages in social life (Bielsa 2021a).

By uncovering an essentially coherent view of the social significance of language and translation throughout Benjamin's intellectual trajectory, this article also calls attention to a generally underresearched aspect of his theory of modern experience, as existing scholarship has emphasised the graphic and visual elements that are associated with dialectical images, rather than Benjamin's linguistic approach. Indeed, as Hanssen (2006) has argued, 'for all the methodological and ideological approaches Benjamin espoused over the years, his writings on language as a whole displayed a remarkable unity; they all enacted – performed – an unwavering critique of rationalistic, instrumentalist, or aestheticizing conceptions of language and rhetoric *in the medium of language*.' (p. 54).

Translating Baudelaire: Articulating the task of translation

Benjamin's (1996a) interest in translation is at the centre of his early concern with the philosophy of language. This is evidenced in the first essay where he considers the subject, 'On Language as Such and the Language of Man', written in 1916, where he employs a wide definition of translation, asserting that knowledge originates in translation (and, specifically, in 'the translation of the language of things into the language of man'), reveals a simultaneous interest in the multiplicity of languages (as opposed to a concern with origins), and offers a view of translation as transformation. 'The Task of the Translator' differs from this more general account because it originates as a reflexive engagement with Benjamin's own translation of Baudelaire's 'Tableaux parisiens' into German. It was originally published in 1923 as its foreword.² Its focus is thus a more restricted but, at the same time, more profound examination of the particularities of translation in its interlinguistic dimensions. Written in 1921 after a long intermittent engagement with the translation of poems from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal* which was initiated in 1914 (Eiland and Jennings, 2014), 'The Task of the Translator' shows two major forms of continuity with the reflection on language contained in Benjamin's earlier text: a consideration of translation in its non-instrumental dimensions and an appeal to its metaphysical and mystical aspects. Against the 'bourgeois conception of language', the 1916 essay explicitly rejected instrumentalism through the articulation of an alternative approach which 'knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication' (Benjamin, 1996a: 65). Benjamin's (1996a) perspective of communicating '*in* language and not *through* language' (p. 63) is preserved in 'The Task of the Translator', where an unsatisfactory emphasis on mental and linguistic being and an evocation of an Adamic theory of naming in the earlier essay is reorientated towards a concern with the historical character of languages.

It is customary to remark on Benjamin's single-handed refusal to consider reception as a relevant factor in any critical appreciation of the work and, consequently, of (literary) translation (see, for instance, Benjamin, 2014; Berman, 2018; de Man, 1986). 'The Task of the Translator' starts, in fact, with the following statement: 'In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful', in a paragraph that ends by positing that 'No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the audience' (Benjamin, 1996b: 253). This contrasts with Benjamin's position in his last text on Baudelaire, 'On Some Motifs on Baudelaire' (written in 1939), where he is positively approached as addressing a reader who can no longer connect with lyric poetry. It is also difficult to avoid relating translatability, a central concern in 'The Task of the Translator', to reproducibility, which Benjamin sees as a key characteristic of cultural forms like photography and cinema which, thanks to new technological means, serve to bring art closer to the masses, eager to lay their hands on works which they receive in a state of distraction.³ As Reiner Rochlitz has argued, coming into contact with the literary and political avant-garde in 1924–25 (particularly surrealism, Proust, Kraus, Kafka, Brecht, photography and Russian cinema) overturned Benjamin's entire philosophical perspective:

According to the central idea of his early philosophy, true language communicated itself only to God or expressed human essence through the authentic exercise of the faculty of naming.

The avant-garde, on the contrary, was seeking to affect the receiver. For Benjamin, traditional art enclosed truth in its *being* or its *substance*; avant-garde art was related to truth through its *action* on the receiver or through its *function*. Its addressee was no longer God but, rather, the profane public, those who were open to contributing to the transformation of the world. (Rochlitz, 1996: 115, emphasis in original).

In light of subsequent developments in Benjamin's thought, it is thus not the lack of engagement with reception but rather Benjamin's non-instrumental approach to translation, which excludes any function of language as communication, that should be taken as key to an interpretation of 'The Task of the Translator'. This leads Benjamin to consider translation as a form which is essentially related to the original's translatability. A translatable work calls for translation. This inverts conventional wisdom on translation (the notion that it serves readers who cannot understand the original) and has far-reaching consequences that point towards an alternative conception. Like criticism, with which it is inextricably related, translation manifests a 'vital' connection with the original: 'a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife' (Benjamin, 1996b: 254). In this conception, as derivative products, translations are not imperfect copies of works of art, but rather mark 'their stage of continued life', their survival. And it is in this respect that Benjamin's (1996b) key concern with history and becoming is formulated at its fullest:

The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its survival, has reached the age of its fame. Contrary, therefore, to the claims of bad translators, such translations do not so much serve the works as owe their existence to it. In them the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding. (p. 255)

As 'the unfolding of a special and high form of life', Benjamin's account of translation recalls Goethe's (2009) *Metamorphosis of Plants*, which describes a process of refinement of form and substance from coarse to purer liquids that holds the key to the multiplicity of nature. Benjamin had read it together with his wife Dora in 1918 (Eiland and Jennings, 2014: 100). Indeed, it is a process of metamorphosis that defines the relationship between original and translation, in an image that in its focus on renewal and maturation also directly evokes Goethe's approach to translation⁴:

no translation would be possible if in its ultimate essence it strove for likeness to the original. For in its afterlife – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. (Benjamin, 1996b: 256)

It is from such an understanding of translation as transformation and unfolding, which denies a conventional understanding of translation as communication or transfer of information, that translation's purpose or task is formulated: 'Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the innermost relationship of languages to one

another. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form' (Benjamin, 1996b: 255). Translation represents or performs an already existing kinship of languages, as 'languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express' (Benjamin, 1996b: 255). Benjamin's vision of the kinship of languages should be interpreted neither in metaphysical terms, which his reference to an a priori existence of languages outside historical relationships would seem to suggest, nor as a return to a 'traditional theory of translation'. Benjamin himself warns us against the second error by explaining that kinship does not refer to a resemblance, so that translations do not demonstrate it by accurately conveying the form and meaning of originals. Rather, he cryptically draws an analogy with a critique of cognition that rests on the impossibility of a theory of imitation. In order to understand the reason for this analogy, as well as to combat the first error, that is, the inadequacy of metaphysics to grasp this relationship, we need to turn to Benjamin's later writings on language, where it is formulated with reference to what Benjamin refers to as nonsensuous similarity.

It is primarily two key texts that incarnate Benjamin's move away from a metaphysical theory of language towards a materialist account: 'The Mimetic Faculty' and 'Problems in the Sociology of Language: An Overview', written in 1933 and 1934 respectively. Benjamin rejected in 'The Task of the Translator' a notion of the kinship of languages founded on apparent similarity (a narrow view of both kinship and translation) or common origins (of languages in history). However, he unsatisfactorily recurred to the notion of pure language, appealing to the complementary character of the totality of languages.⁵ In its association with both metaphysics and poetic language (Berman, 2018: 129), pure language must be seen in terms of what Benjamin would subsequently describe as an 'illicit "poetic"' formulation (Tiedemann, 1999: 937). This is why later writings are rather centred on language's mimetic and/or expressive character.

In 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (Benjamin, 1999d) language is seen as the preserve of a nonsensuous similarity that is associated with the mimetic faculty.⁶ If language is not, Benjamin maintains, an agreed-upon system of signs, attention must be paid to imitative behaviour in language, which has been acknowledged in onomatopoeia. Onomatopoeia produces signifiers that imitate extralinguistic sounds in different ways in a multiplicity of languages, and is thus the most primitive form through which nonsensuous similarity, a resemblance that persists through difference, can be perceived:

For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another – are similar to the signified at their center. Yet this kind of similarity cannot be explained only by the relationships between words meaning the same thing in different languages, just as, in general, our reflections cannot be restricted to the spoken word. (Benjamin, 1999d: 721)

It is the written word – not orality, as Berman (2018: 207–208) maintains – that more vividly illuminates the nature of nonsensuous similarity by the relation of its written form to the signified. This is why Benjamin is interested in graphology, which 'has

taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it' (Berman, 2018: 207–208).

For Benjamin (1999d), the mimetic element in language does not develop in isolation from the semiotic aspect:

Rather, the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself only through a kind of bearer. This bearer is the semiotic element. Thus, the nexus of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man – like its perception by him – is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. (p. 722)

This conception is particularly important for a theory of translation which, for Benjamin, similarly reveals the kinship of languages in flash-like form.⁷ More generally, through a view of language 'as the highest level of mimetic behavior and the most complete archive of nonsensuous similarity: a medium into which the earlier powers of mimetic production and comprehension have passed without residue' (Benjamin, 1999d), a theory of language that highlights its non-instrumental character to the detriment of its communicative function is renewed in the light of historical materialism.

In 'Problems in the Sociology of Language' Benjamin's (2002a) concern is to delineate the contours of a sociology of language as a border area that straddles across disciplines, most clearly linguistics and sociology, but also child psychology, animal psychology and ethnology. He offers an overview of how these disciplines converge around the question of the origin of language, which is approached, following Karl Bühler, through two different paths: a predominance of the onomatopoeic principle, on the one hand, or of symbolic representation, on the other. Lévy-Bruhl provided an influential account of the onomatopoeic theory, conceiving primitive languages as descriptive vocal gestures which are attributed magical qualities. 'Sociology cannot isolate itself methodologically from any of Lévy-Bruhl's concerns', Benjamin (2002a: 73) states, referring particularly to the magical use of words and to the language of gesture. On the other hand, Bühler proposes a symbolic theory of naming words to account for how linguistic representation is emancipated from the concrete linguistic situation. Phylogenetic and ontogenetic aspects appear in the language of chimpanzees, where tool-thinking is seen as independent of language, and child language, who learns to speak only because it lives in a linguistic environment. Piaget's work on egocentric childhood language interests Benjamin because it refers to a language that has no communicative function and is only intelligible to oneself: 'It is the precursor, indeed the teacher, of thought' (Benjamin, 2002a: 83). Most significantly, it is 'a mimetic theory in a far wider sense' than an already obsolete onomatopoeic theory that is seen as the basis of a physiognomics of language (a term he adopts from the work of Heinz Werner), which 'makes it clear that the expressive means of language are as inexhaustible as its representational means' (Benjamin, 2002a: 85). It is from such physiognomic powers, from language's inherently expressive character (which those concentrating on its semantic function have overlooked), that a future linguistic sociology must draw. And a patient suffering from aphasia is seen to provide the most instructive model against a solely instrumental language:

this instrumental function presupposes that language is really something quite different, just as it was for the patient before his or her illness. . . . As soon as human beings use language to establish a living relationship to themselves and to others, language is no longer an instrument. (Goldstein, quoted in Benjamin, 2002a: 85)

The purpose of translation is to express or represent the reciprocal relationship between languages, an existing kinship of languages that is hidden by their instrumental, communicative function. Benjamin provides two key allegories in the last part of 'The Task of the Translator' in relation to this task: translation as an echo of the original, and translation and original as fragments of a greater vessel. 'The task of the translator consists in finding the particular intention toward the target language which produces in that language the echo of the original' (Benjamin, 1996b: 258). In spite of its conventionality and ambiguity, the notion of echo is used by Benjamin (1996b) to identify the relationship of the translator with language, which differs from that of the poet because it is orientated towards language as a whole, as it were from its outside, in order to produce 'the reverberation of the work in the alien one' (pp. 258–259). 'The intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, manifest; that of the translator is derivative, ultimate, ideational' (Benjamin, 1996b: 259), and precisely because of this it conceals a language of truth that the philosopher yearns for.

In light of Benjamin's subsequent writings, the snapshot or the flash, rather than the echo, would have perhaps more incisively expressed the momentary reconciliation of languages that can be achieved in translation.⁸ However, the echo also subtly evokes the notion of aura that occupies Benjamin in several key essays (most notably, 'A Short History of Photography', 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' and 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire'), both in its ambiguity as well as in its allusion to the positive significance of distance in our relationships with things. The aura is related to the unique existence of the work of art, to its presence in time and space. And it is not just the new techniques of mechanical reproduction (especially photography and cinema) that foster its disintegration. Translations, which similarly respond to 'the desire of the present-day masses to "get closer" to things spatially and humanly' (Benjamin, 2003b: 251), substitute the unique existence of works by a plurality of copies. Translation shares with reproduction its association with transitoriness, continued survival and transmission, rather than permanence, authenticity and authority. It makes possible the work's emancipation from ritual and the assumption of 'quite new functions', among which 'the one we are conscious of – the artistic function – may subsequently be seen as incidental' (Benjamin, 2003b: 257). It is this achievement that makes translation one of the great techniques of modernity at a time when auratic art and the tradition on which it is based have been shattered.

The second, more enduring allegory that Benjamin provides towards the end of 'The Task of the Translator', refers to the relationship between original and translation as fragments of a greater language:

Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of

meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (Benjamin, 1996b: 260)

The great longing that languages might complete each other, the purpose of translation, is expressed precisely through difference (or nonsensuous similarity) in fragmentary form. A good translation ‘gives voice to the *intentio* of the original not as reproduction but as harmony’; it is transparent, ‘it does not cover the original, does not block its light’ (Benjamin, 1996b). How this view of the kinship of languages in their fragmentary multiplicity is inspired in the mysticism of the Lurian Kabbalah has attracted significant attention (Benjamin, 2014: 97–98; de Man, 1986: 89–91; Hanssen, 2006: 57). Less thought has been devoted to its connection with Benjamin’s theory of modernity, and particularly with the dialectical image as a dialectic at a standstill, ‘the piecing together of what history has broken to bits’ (Tiedemann, 1999: 944).

In fact, the fragmentary harmony of languages that is reconstituted through translation finds a remarkable correspondence in the fragmentary form through which Benjamin will seek to construct a prehistory of modernity in *The Arcades Project*. Indeed, Benjamin’s life project, which first emerged in the late 1920s as the plan for an essay and progressively became the big unfinished philosophic structure that has reached us, was consistently devised as an assemblage of fragments in which nothing was deemed too insignificant; a collection of refuse, a montage of trash (Benjamin, 1999e: 459–460). The mode of construction was deemed as important as the principle of inclusiveness and conceived from its very inception as a form of ‘extreme concreteness’ in which the fragment remained the gateway to the totality (Frisby, 1985: 190). Benjamin sought ‘to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event’ (Benjamin, 1999e: 461). The image of the broken vessel or that of the mosaic, which he used in *Origin of the German Trauerspiel* (1925), powerfully evoke how the loose fragments of languages or history can be put together so as to offer a momentary glimpse of a greater whole. Thus, rather than embracing the fragmentary, this form of construction should be viewed in relationship with Benjamin’s outline of a linguistic sociology around a materialist physiognomics, as will be argued in the concluding section.

Interpreting Baudelaire: The experience of modernity

Following Benjamin’s view of translation as the afterlife of the original, we can approach his mature interpretation of Baudelaire as the afterlife of both Baudelaire’s articulation of the experience of modern life and Benjamin’s own reflections on translation in ‘The Task of the Translator’, metamorphosed into his interpretation of modernity. It is not just that criticism and interpretation are, like translation, important instances of the afterlife through which works both survive and are transformed. Perhaps less visibly but no less remarkably, in translating Baudelaire Benjamin made his a vision that he could later develop and put to work in his analysis of modernity. In this he was not acting essentially different from Baudelaire himself, who in translating Poe adopted the detective genre, which he transposed to his lyric work.⁹ As Benjamin (2006) states, ‘Poe’s work was definitely absorbed in his own, and Baudelaire emphasizes this fact by stating his solidarity with the method in which the individual genres that Poe embraced harmonize’

(pp. 73–74). Benjamin's use of the notion of 'absorption' is revealing, as is the term 'harmonize'. The task of the translator and the task of the literary historian as interpreter of the continued life of works are, in fact, indissociably intertwined in a historical conception that uncovers the past through its reverberations in the present:

What is at stake is not to portray literary works in the context of their age, but to represent the age that perceives them – our age – in the age during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history; and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history, is the task of the literary historian. (Benjamin, 1999c: 464)

Not only does Benjamin in this 1931 essay entitled 'Literary History and the Study of Literature' identify works (rather than individuals or problems) as key to this task with reference to 'their entire life and their effects' (i.e. 'their fate, their reception by their contemporaries, their translations, their fame'); he explicitly points at the task of the interpreter in terms that evoke the task of the translator, who cannot possibly reveal or establish the hidden relationship between languages, but 'can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form'. The objective of such task is no longer conceived in terms of a mystical pure language, but as a language in which history is sedimented.

The key to Benjamin's interpretative work and cultural analysis is his attention to a wide range of previously neglected phenomena, including popular culture and practices like translation or photography, which maintain an ambiguous relationship with art, on the one hand, and the search for a constructive method that privileges the perceptible presence of cultural forms on the other. The contours of this practice already appear in Benjamin's early work on the baroque *Trauerspiel* but receive their most mature formulation in the late writings associated with *The Arcades Project*, in which Benjamin introduced 'new and far-reaching sociological perspectives' (Benjamin, quoted in Tiedemann, 1999: 937), particularly its 1939 exposé, entitled 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century'. At the centre of this brief text is the allegorical genius of Baudelaire, with whom 'Paris becomes for the first time the subject of lyric poetry' (Benjamin, 1999e: 21). However, 'The gaze which the allegorical genius turns on the city betrays. . . a profound alienation' (Benjamin, 1999e: 21); it is the gaze of the *flâneur*, for whom the familiar city is transformed into phantasmagoria and who has entered the marketplace 'thinking merely to look around; but in fact. . . already seeking a buyer' (Benjamin, 1999e: 21).

The study of Baudelaire offers a 'miniature model' of *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, cited in Tiedemann, 1999: 929). Benjamin's last text on Baudelaire, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire', was written in 1939 as a revision of an earlier piece entitled 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire', of 1938. It centrally posits the transformation of modern experience in order to explain why Baudelaire was the last lyric poet to successfully connect with the public on a mass scale:

Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties. The introductory poem of the *Fleurs du mal* is addressed to these readers. Willpower and the ability to concentrate are not their strong points. What they prefer is sensual pleasure; they are familiar with the "spleen" which kills interest and receptiveness. It is strange to come across a

lyric poet who addresses himself to such readers – the least rewarding type of audience. There is of course a ready explanation for it. Baudelaire wanted to be understood; he dedicates his book to those who are like him. (2006: 170)

Benjamin (2006) approaches ‘the experience which presented itself undistorted to Baudelaire’s eyes, in the figure of his reader’ (p. 172) and to which Bergson’s philosophy was a response (later put to the test in Proust’s magnum opus¹⁰) in terms of the difference between long experience (*Erfahrung*) and isolated experience (*Erlebnis*). Long experience is experience over time, where elements of the individual past are firmly anchored in the collective past; as such, recollection can be triggered at certain times and remains available to memory throughout people’s lives (Benjamin, 2006: 174–175). The substitution of experience by isolated information, for instance in newspapers, that can no longer be assimilated expresses the increasing atrophy of experience, an insight which Benjamin first formulated in his well-known essay ‘The Storyteller’ in 1936. In ‘On Some Motifs’ Benjamin refers to Freud’s approach to the relationship between memory and consciousness, expressed in the fundamental insight that ‘emerging consciousness takes the place of a memory trace’, which sees becoming conscious and leaving behind a memory trace as incompatible processes (Benjamin, 2006: 175). Thus, vestiges of memory never enter consciousness, while consciousness is rather seen in terms of its important function of protection against potentially destructive stimuli or shocks. For Benjamin (2006),

That the shock is thus cushioned, parried by consciousness, would lend the incident that occasions it the character of isolated experience [*Erlebnis*], in the strict sense. If it were incorporated directly in the registry of conscious memory, it would sterilize this incident for poetic experience [*Erfahrung*].

One wonders how lyric poetry can be grounded in experience [*einer Erfahrung*] for which exposure to shock [*Chockerlebnis*] has become the norm. (p. 177)

Baudelaire places an inherently contradictory shock experience [*Chockerfahrung*] at the very centre of his art (Benjamin, 2006: 178). His mission or task is precisely conceived in terms of bestowing the weight of long experience on the isolated experiences that have become the norm in modernity. This demands a heroic disposition on the part of the poet, who undertakes solitary writing as a *fantasque escrime* [fantastical fencing], but also a profound connection with the urban masses, conceived as ‘the amorphous crowd of passers-by, the people in the street’ (Benjamin, 2006: 180). Benjamin (2006) notes that ‘The masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire that it is rare to find a description of them in his works’ (p. 183). The masses are the ‘agitated veil’ through which Baudelaire views Paris, ‘imprinted on his creativity as a hidden figure’ (Benjamin, 2006: 184, 180). As such, they become ‘a phantom crowd’ in ‘the words, the fragments, the beginnings of lines, from which the poet, in the deserted streets, wrests poetic booty’ (Benjamin, 2006: 181). As Aguilera (2021) points out reminding us of Benjamin’s non-instrumental approach to language, which resists giving primacy to signification, it is highly relevant that urban crowds are not thematised but rather appear as internal to literature, a phantasmal mass of words:

The phantasmal mass of words necessarily implies an immense mass of Odradek-like objects, a loss in the density of language which has already been decomposed, as Hofmannsthal has shown, melting the thing into words that are already almost empty and into objects. The pre-modern world, where language and world seemed to harmonise, is decomposed into sign materials (symbols and allegories) and objects. . . This division relates to language as a mass, while the masses that erupt socially (industrialisation and urbanisation) and in the political sphere bring about important changes for the historical subject and for desire, for truth itself as having a temporal core. It is the mass of languages, without the hierarchy of the old linguistic order, without the stratifying aristocracy. (p. 229, my translation)

For Aguilera (2021) this does not result in a decomposed language that no longer allows a clear expression of values or opinions (as in Hofmannsthal's 'Letter to Lord Chandos'), but rather in a thingness that can no longer be turned into language (p. 230). Baudelaire captures for poetry experiences that are only known to a city dweller (such as love at last sight, in the poem '*A une passante*') and which would otherwise remain locked within the silence of things.

Baudelaire's poetry also responds to the new challenges posed by mechanisation, a development that in the middle of the 19th century affected widely divergent areas in which a common element could be discerned: 'a single abrupt movement of the hand triggers a process of many steps' (Benjamin, 2006: 190). Mechanisation also changed the nature of art and the way it is received by its public, a phenomenon which Benjamin analysed in detail in his key essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', of 1936. 'On some Motifs in Baudelaire' relates mechanisation to the experience of shock, most clearly perceivable in the 'snapping' of the photographer, which fixes an event for an unlimited period of time through a touch of the finger giving the moment a 'posthumous shock', or in film, where a perception conditioned by shock is established as a formal principle (Benjamin, 2006: 190–191). Whether in production (machine work, the conveyer belt) or in reception (amusement parks) mechanisation replaces experience with training, as different from practice, and is therefore intimately related with isolated experience. 'The shock experience [*Chockerlebnis*] which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to the isolated "experiences" of the worker at his machine' (Benjamin, 2006: 192). These are perhaps nowhere more evident than in the figure of the gambler, presented as a counterpart to the labourer, whose actions are equally devoid of substance and marked by reflexive impulses, fragmentation and empty but never-ending repetition. Both are excluded from the realm of experience (an experience 'that accompanies one to the far reaches of time, that fills and articulates time') as 'the antithesis of time in hell, which is the province of those who are not allowed to complete anything they have started' (Benjamin, 2006: 195).

Deeply ambivalent towards photography, which is associated with isolated experience in its extension of what Proust approached as *mémoire volontaire*, Baudelaire nevertheless does not succumb to nostalgia of a bygone age. To the *correspondances* that signal towards an experience that is already irretrievably lost as the data of prehistory, he adds his spleen poems that express 'something extreme with extreme discretion'; the very inability to experience which is not only his, but also that of his contemporaries, his readers:

In spleen, time is reified; the minutes cover a man like snowflakes. This time is historyless, like that of the *mémoire involontaire*. But in spleen the perception of time is supernaturally keen. Every second finds consciousness ready to intercept its shock. (Benjamin, 2006: 201)

Through spleen, which 'exposes the isolated experience in all its nakedness', Baudelaire 'holds in his hands the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience', whereas Bergson's *durée* 'has become far more estranged from history' (Benjamin, 2006: 201). Only an acute consciousness that is able to parry the shocks of what Simmel (1997) described as the intensification of nervous stimulation caused by 'the swift and uninterrupted change of outer and inner stimuli' characteristic of modern life (p. 175), has the capacity to develop beyond isolated experience (*Chockerlebnis*) into a genuine shock experience (*Chockerfahrung*). From this perspective, Baudelaire's feat is not that he has given artistic form to the private experiences of urbanites, or of an increasingly alienated sector of the intelligentsia, but that he has reconnected these experiences to a collective experience of urban modernity.

'No breath of prehistory surrounds [spleen] – no aura' (Benjamin, 2006: 202). In his essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin (2003b) had defined the aura as 'the unique apparition of a distance' however near an object may be (p. 255). In 'On Some Motifs on Baudelaire' he foregrounds an experience which

arises from the fact that a response characteristic of human relationships is transposed to the relationship between humans and inanimate or natural objects. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us. (Benjamin, 2006: 204)

What is most significant in Baudelaire's poetry are not the forests of symbols which look at him with familiar glances, but rather the description of human eyes that have lost the ability to look. The disintegration of the aura is evoked not just in the wild eyes of the prostitutes also drawn by Constantin Guys but, more generally, in the mirrorlike blankness of the eyes of urbanites who need to protect themselves from the preponderance of rapidly changing visual stimuli. Baudelaire 'has yielded to the spell of eyes-without-a-gaze, and submits to their sway without illusions' (Benjamin, 2006: 206). However, the *flâneur* who readily succumbed to the phantasmagorias of urban life has also found in these fragmentary experiences the source of poetic expression, thus renewing lyric poetry and redefining the role of art in modernity. The price he willingly pays is the loss of his halo, the vanishing of the poet in the city crowd.

The disintegration of the aura makes possible the emancipation of art from tradition and a redefinition of its social role. It is not only brought about by the new techniques of mechanical reproduction and the most advanced art, like that of Baudelaire, which embraces without illusions the fragmentary character of modern experience, but also by translation. Translation's connection with the notion of aura has already been briefly discussed in relation to Benjamin's view of translation as an echo of the original in 'The Task of the Translator'. Like the aura, the echo evokes a 'unique apparition of a distance'. However, it also foregrounds translation's derivative and transitory character, thereby producing significant ambiguities. These ambiguities are also expressed in

Benjamin's comparison of the relationship between content and language in the original and the translation:

Whereas content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien. This disjunction prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous. (Benjamin, 1996b: 258)

Translations can no longer be translated, as translatability, like reproducibility, is linked to the work's uniqueness, its presence in time and space, its authenticity as 'the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it' (Benjamin, 2003b: 254). The naturalness (or authenticity) of an original, expressed in the metaphor of the unity of a fruit and its skin, cannot be reproduced in translation, which necessarily implies not only displacement but also disjunction, the enveloping of content in a loosely fitted robe. However, rather than as a sign of its inherently inferior nature, Benjamin (1996b) interprets this fact in the opposite direction: 'Thus, ironically, translation transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering.' (p. 258).

Fifteen years after writing 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin wrote a second short text on translation which closely resonates with the concerns of his mature work in *The Arcades Project*. Apparently a sketch for an unrealised radio script, the piece was never published; to this day it has been neglected by Benjamin scholarship. Entitled 'Translation – For and Against', it adopts the form of a dialogue between two friends. One of them describes coming across a French translation of a German philosophical book (we later learn that it is a book by Nietzsche) while passing an open-air bookstall on an urban stroll: 'Leafing through it, as one does with books on the *quais*, I looked for the passages which had often engrossed me. What a surprise – the passages were not there' (Benjamin, 2002b: 249). The remembered passages had not simply disappeared and could still be found in the translation, 'But when I looked them in the face, I had the awkward feeling that they no more recognized me than I did them' (Benjamin, 2002b: 249). Translation appears here as a text that does not return our gaze, much like the self-absorbed urbanites depicted by Baudelaire. Benjamin (2002b) examines the reason for this without nostalgia:

what disconcerted me about the passages that had been familiar to me was not a deficiency in the translation but something which may even have been its merit: the horizon and the world around the translated text had itself been substituted, had become French. (p. 249)

In translating a linguistic situation into another, translation is described as a *technique*, significantly modifying Benjamin's approach to translation as a *form* in 'The Task of the Translator'. Crucially, Benjamin now argues that (in combination with other techniques like that of the commentary) translation can be used to acknowledge its own role and make 'the fact of the different linguistic situation one of its themes', effectively becoming,

through this reflexive exercise, 'a component of its own world'. On the contrary, in taking the opposite route, 'The translation of important works will be less likely to succeed, the more it strives to elevate its subservient technical function into an autonomous art form.' (Benjamin, 2002b: 250).

We should not rush to deplore what is lost in translation. As a technique, like photography or film, translation directly connects with the collective experience of modernity, with the desire of the masses to get closer to things spatially and humanly. This is why it can better resist the temptation of bad poets who might pick up Baudelaire's lost halo from the muddy asphalt pavement. Beyond the mirages of authenticity, it is precisely translation's derivative nature, already positively interpreted in 'The Task of the Translator', that provides the key to a much needed reflexivity on the linguistic materials that mediate our relationship with the world and with others in a postmonolingual world, where the role played by linguistic multiplicity in our ordinary social experience can no longer be ignored.

Recovering a philological attitude

In summarising his CV, Benjamin (1999a) once referred to his engagement with French literature as part of 'a programmatic attempt to bring about a process of integration in scholarship – one that will increasingly dismantle the rigid partitions between the disciplines' (p. 78). In the various CV outlines that have reached us, written at different moments of his trajectory, translation remains consistently at the centre of this endeavour, both through the undertaking of a number of translations of key modern writers (most notably Baudelaire and Proust) as well as through a recurrent interest in problems of translation associated with the philosophy of language. More generally, it could also be said that 'Benjamin's intention in his prehistory of modernity of reading the reality of the nineteenth century like a text that speaks to us' (Frisby, 1985: 230) constitutes essentially an act of translation between the language of mute things and human language in the non-metaphorical sense that Benjamin specified in his very first essay on the subject ('On Language as Such and the Language of Man'). However, if we go by existing interpretations, Benjamin has never ceased to fail in his attempt. The present article has sought to do justice to the essential continuity in Benjamin's task of translating and interpreting Baudelaire by analysing Benjamin's early essay on translation in light of his more mature materialist approach, while also connecting it to his late work on Baudelaire, through which he sought to arrive at a critical understanding of 19th century modernity.

In this concluding section I will briefly elaborate on how what Benjamin refers to as his philological approach relates to an original materialist methodology that interprets the most diverse materials of reality without subsuming them under theoretical totalisations or abstractions. The tense exchange between Benjamin and Adorno on 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire' is the most illustrative text in this respect. In a letter written in November 1938, Adorno formulated an extensive critique of Benjamin's piece in which he attacked its lack of theoretical interpretation as well as its inadequate mediation between cultural and economic phenomena. Benjamin's response is especially telling, not only because he tacitly accepts Adorno's second point (of which every trace has disappeared in 'On Some Motifs on Baudelaire'), but also in the way it explains the

perceived lack of theorising as ‘the proper philological attitude’, rather than an ‘ascetic discipline’, as Adorno maintains.

Indeed, on this point Adorno and Benjamin are diametrically opposed. In ‘The Task of the Translator’, Benjamin (1996b) had written that a true translation

does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax which proves words rather than sentences to be the primary element of the translator. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade. (p. 260)

Adorno, by contrast, does not sufficiently attend to the linguistic materials which are so paramount to Benjamin in referring to the abstention from theorising as ‘blockading the ideas behind impenetrable walls of material, as your ascetic discipline requires’ (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 100). Moreover, the ideas to which Adorno alludes in this fragment come dangerously close to ‘the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content’ which Benjamin defined as the hallmark of a bad translation (Benjamin, 1996b: 251).

After several references to a concept of theory that illumines objects like a lightning flash and that ‘comes into its own in an *undistorted* way’ (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 107, emphasis in original), Benjamin turns in his reply to an underlying central problem of construction that derives from the existing antagonism between his ‘most personal production-interests’ and dialectical materialism, an antagonism that he has ‘no wish to escape. . . even in dreams’ (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 107):

When you speak of “a wide-eyed presentation of facticity” you are in fact describing the proper philological attitude. It was necessary to adopt this, not just for its results, but for its role in the essay’s construction. The non-differentiation between magic and positivism, as you aptly formulate it, must indeed be liquidated. In other words, the author’s philological interpretation is to be sublated by dialectical materialists in the Hegelian manner.—The philological approach entails examining the text detail by detail, leading the reader to fixate magically on the text. That which Faust takes home in black and white, and Grimm’s veneration of the minuscule [*Kleinen*], are closely related. They have in common the magical element, which it is left to philosophy. . . to exorcise. (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 107–108)

Benjamin does not contemplate the possibility of a critique of myth that is not properly grounded on the object, constituted as a monad: ‘In the monad, the textual detail which was frozen in a mythical rigidity comes alive’ (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 108). This is why only a ‘genuine reading’ can ‘open up the material content, from which the truth content can then be plucked off historically like petals’ (Eiland and Jennings, 2003: 108). The genuine reading through which Benjamin sought to capture the truth of an epoch as it was silently expressed in its most diverse cultural manifestations was to be achieved through the procedures of a materialist physiognomics of language that recognises both its semiotic as well as its expressive aspects. Long before he articulated its principles in the outline of a future linguistic sociology, Benjamin was already familiar with its practice through the fastidious work on words that is associated with translation. In its

attention to concrete objects no matter how small, such practice can be said to lay the foundations of a translational philosophy or, indeed, sociology of modernity.

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Notes

1. A relevant exception is Niranjana (1992), who focusses on the relationship between 'The Task of the Translator' and Benjamin's critique of historicism, most notably in his essay on Edward Fuchs, where a materialist account of historiography is offered. Benjamin's notion of after-life, introduced in 'The Task', is developed in the text on Fuchs more fully. For an account and periodisation of the English reception of 'The Task of the Translator' in translation studies circles see Ingram (1997).
2. In contrast with his theory of translation, Benjamin's work as a translator of Baudelaire has not attracted a significant degree of attention. Thus, Berman (2018) refers to 'The Task' as *the* 20th-century text on translation, but to the Baudelaire translation as a failure, characterising it as formulaic and quasi-scholastic (p. 37). In fact, Benjamin's own essay distinguishes itself from what is customary in translators' forewords because it does not contain any single mention of his Baudelaire translation.
3. Benjamin deals with the consequences of technical reproduction in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. For an analysis of photographic reproduction that develops a comparison with Benjamin's essay on 'The Task of the Translator' see Aguilera (2004).
4. For an account of Goethe's approach to translation as regeneration and revival see Berman (1992) and Bielsa (2014, 2016).
5. Berman (2018) identifies in Benjamin's reference to pure language the central phrase of 'The Task of the Translator' (p. 128). This, together with his appeal to Heidegger to interpret the essay, against Benjamin's own disparaging remarks on the latter, constitutes the biggest shortcoming of his otherwise profound and rich interpretation, to which this account is opposed.
6. Benjamin (1999d) addresses as the mimetic faculty what Elias Canetti considers in terms of transformation or metamorphosis, the gift for producing and recognising similarities, which is abundant in primitive societies and children but diminishes greatly in the course of history so that 'the perceptual world [*Merkwelt*] of modern man contains only minimal residues of the magical correspondences and analogies that were familiar to ancient peoples' (p. 721) (see Canetti, 1979, 1981; see also Bielsa 2021b).
7. This significant relationship between mimesis and translation is denied by Andrew Benjamin

- (2014), who asserts that ‘The connection between original and translation does not lie. . . in a domain dominated by mimesis but rather one orchestrated by what Benjamin describes as the “kinship” of languages. “Kinship” involves the essence of language not a mimetic relation made possible by the commonality of language’. (p. 91, see also p. 96). This view remains locked within a conventional theory of mimesis as apparent similarity, which Walter Benjamin opposes, and does not perceive the latter’s appeal to the mimetic faculty as a move to overcome linguistic essentialism.
8. In the 1933 essay entitled ‘Doctrine of the Similar’ Benjamin (1999b) states: ‘The perception of similarity is in every case bound to a flashing up. It flits past, can possibly be won again, but cannot really be held fast as can other perceptions. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and transitorily as a constellation of stars.’ (pp. 695–696). The image of the flash is reworked in ‘The Mimetic Faculty’ in the fragment cited above. It is also at the heart of Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical image, through which he attempts to show how history crystallises in the present, in *The Arcades Project*. In the theses ‘On the Concept of History’ it receives Benjamin’s (2003a) most mature formulation: ‘The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again’ (p. 390).
 9. Like Benjamin, Baudelaire not only translated the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, but wrote several interpretative pieces on the American author, with whom he closely identified, as a way of reflecting not only on Poe’s approach and ‘philosophical technique’, but also on his own (Baudelaire, 1988).
 10. See Bielsa (2021c) for an account of Proust’s approach to memory and forgetting in relation to ignored works.

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