

“To Read What Was Never Written”

FROM DECONSTRUCTION TO A POETICS OF REDEMPTION

In one of his less well-known ambidextrous fables, “The Translators of The 1001 Nights,” Jorge Luis Borges (1981) captures in its tone and design the vicissitudes of poststructuralist critical theory as it negotiates its rite of passage from modernism to postmodernism. If we have no access to the source text, can we trust the interpreter? The problem of translation, of hermeneutics in general (subsuming the family of language games called interpretation, exegesis, commentary, and so forth), inheres in the ordeal of a choice that critics are compelled to face in a time when the author’s death, for some his protracted obsolescence, has been celebrated (by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, among others) at the same time as the birth of the reader and the sacrifice of her innocence. This ordeal, now probably a banal exercise for the heirs of deconstruction and neopragmatism, was initially posed by Jacques Derrida as a choice between assuming the truth of an origin (the prototypical or paradigmatic text, founding vessel of the unitary cogito, the autonomous subject) and affirming “free play” beyond humanism, beyond metaphysics, beyond the dream “of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game” (Derrida 1988, 122). We are urged to choose not “suspension of disbelief” nor “the best that is known and thought,” but *jouissance*, the dance of the negative, desire, *différance*—the temptation to think the unthinkable, to be seduced by the sirens of undecidability.

In Borges’ intertextual game, the competing translators of the Arabian nights resolved by their stance of naive mastery the tension between fidelity to an origin and premeditated betrayal: they did not hesitate to improve the original. It was the path followed by an illustrious predecessor, Edward FitzGerald, the author/translator of the *Rubaiyyat*. No doubt the code of “Orientalism” (Edward Said’s term) and its decorum saved them from the imperative of honoring the original script; hence Borges praises the “happy, creative infidelity” of Mardrus. How can one be faithful if the original is “a confusion of mirrors, the mask is beneath the face, so

that no one knows which is the true man and which his idols"? The text our translators would "bear across" (the literal sense of *translatu*s) is a space where "Chance has played at symmetry, at contrast, at digression" (1981, 86). "Always already" treacherous, the original can no longer be traduced nor betrayed. At this juncture, we find ourselves trapped in a labyrinth of mirrors, re-inscribed as it were in Lacan's register of the Imaginary.

Borges attempts to diagnose the idiosyncrasies of each translator by adducing the influences of race, nationality, cultural milieu, individual temperament (Hippolyte Taine's coordinates), and accidental conjunctures of society and artist; their reciprocal dynamics would explain the peculiarities of each translation. But in his tone of mock erudition and serio-comic judiciousness, Borges only succeeds in parodying his philological pretext: he presents miniature encyclopedias of each author, a foretaste of the pastiche each would replicate in turn. But no betrayal has been committed, it seems, for after all the putative original (how can it be authenticated?) was itself an intriguingly puzzling game. And, to compound the imbroglio, each translator—Galland, Lane, Burton, Dr. Mardrus and Enno Littman—seems to be prematurely suffering from Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence"! In the course of anatomizing the translator's dilemma, Borges historicizes the dualism but in the same gesture pronounces it a mirage:

The elegant Newman-Arnold debate (1861–62), more memorable than its two interlocutors, has argued extensively the two general ways of translating. Newman in it defended the literal mode, the retention of all verbal singularities; Arnold, the strict elimination of distracting or hindering details. This proceeding may furnish the pleasures of uniformity and gravity; the other, continuous small wonders. Both are less important than the translator and his literary habits. To translate the spirit is an intention of such enormity, so phantasmal, that it can well turn out to be inoffensive; to translate the letter, a precision so extravagant that there is no risk in attempting it. (1981, 76)

If translating the spirit is phantasmal and mimicking the letter futile or superfluous, then the effort of reading or making sense, interpretation in general, becomes (to echo Sartre) a vain if not useless passion.

One wonders how, in the process of contextual evocation, Borges' translators have so uncannily become Dickensian creatures who are soon to metamorphose into Kafkaesque characters, caught in the toils of an alien narrative whose form/substance they have tried to render in their own native language. (Without knowing it, they have themselves been "translated," so to speak, by Borges.) It might be that the etymological, archaic force of the verb "to translate"—to transfer or move relics, or a saint's body, from one place (of internment) to another; to entrance or enrapture; to cause to remove one disease from one part of the body to

another (Webster 1972)—has exercised a spell on our archival guide so that a psychoanalytic transference may be said to have transpired. No compromise (such as that made by Schlegel-Tieck with Shakespeare) between original and mimicry was reached. In any case, if translation is an impossible and futile task, is the hope for a correct reading a delusion?

The controversy in contemporary critical theory over meaning and the problem of valid interpretation (re-writing: iterability, the repetition *problématique*) pivots less on the circularity of the hermeneutic method, which has been debated in the West from Schleiermacher to Heidegger, Gadamer, Hirsch, and Rorty, than on questions of how language or textuality connects with history, society, and power. Feminism, the new historicism, and various postmodernist schools (Lyotard, Baudrillard) are all contesting the terrain which Borges' translators have left desolate. Translation construed as mediation of the horizons of discourse becomes the key issue.¹ Derrida's wager of choices I alluded to earlier, its refusal of history and the phenomenology of experience, may be concretized by glossing an exemplary text of the major deconstructionist of our time, Paul de Man (1986): his commentary on Walter Benjamin's 1923 essay "The Task of the Translator."

De Man begins his lecture by citing the advance of philosophic comprehension attested to by Gadamer's concept of modernity centered on language and the historicity of understanding. In contrast to the pragmatic view, Benjamin's dismissal of the importance of the reader or audience (in the first paragraph of his essay) represents for de Man a prophetic and antimodernist position (for a contrasting approach, see Jameson [1971]). Benjamin is credited with a gnostic historicism based on apocalyptic remembrance, a secularized epiphany blasting "the continuum of history"—the empty homogeneous time of bourgeois commodity fetishism (1969, 261). De Man points out that this ambivalent image of Benjamin has repercussions in the blindness of his translators who misread the original, and whose failure is for that reason heuristic. For de Man, the failure of the translator is the object lesson: "The translator has to give up in relation to the task of refinding what was there in the original" (1986, 80). Benjamin distinguishes between the poet and the translator: the poet seeks to convey a meaning (a statement of something outside language), whereas—de Man paraphrases—"the relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language," whereby the translator vanishes and *langue* occupies the site vacated by *parole*: "Translation is a relation from language to language, not a relation to an extralinguistic meaning" (1986, 82). Translation resembles philosophy in that it is not an imitation of the world as we know it; it also resembles criticism or theory of litera-

1. I concur with Jacobs' view that for Benjamin, "translation functions as a metaphor both for the potential text-ness of a text and also as a metaphor for that which Benjamin calls 'criticism' . . . in which the textness of the text is given full play" (1978, xvi-xvii).

ture (following the tenets of Friedrich Schlegel and Jena Romanticism). De Man generalizes the ironic thrust of translation for Benjamin when it "undoes the stability of the original by giving it a definitive, canonical form in the translation or in the theorization." Just as for Borges' translators, so here the original is neither definitive nor canonical: "The translation canonizes, freezes, an original and shows in the original a mobility, an instability, which at first one did not notice" (1986, 82). What a speculative reader like de Man does is what a translator for Benjamin does: the original is not imitated or reproduced but "put in motion, de-canonized, questioned in a way which undoes its claim to canonical authority." Further, translation resembles history (assumed here as a non-organic process) in being the perspective from which natural changes are understood; the original can be understood only from the perspective of the translation.

The translation then does not put across (*übersetzen*) or imitate the original. Like philosophy, critical theory and history, translation disarticulates and undoes the original; it reveals that the original was "always already disarticulated." All these acts of dismantling and transporting, de Man elaborates, "kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead. They read the original from the perspective of a pure language (*reine Sprache*), a language that would be entirely freed of the illusion of meaning—pure form if you want; and in doing so they bring to light a dismemberance, a de-canonization which was already there in the original from the beginning. . . . Translation, to the extent that it disarticulates the original, to the extent that it is pure language and is only concerned with language, gets drawn into what he calls the bottomless depth, something essentially destructive, which is in language itself" (1986, 84). Relative to this "pure language" unconcerned with meaning, translation discloses "the suffering of the original language." (At this point, de Man illustrates the failure of the translators to reformulate precisely Benjamin's meaning—and therefore reveal the "suffering" of the original?) Translation reveals the death of the original, but more crucial it reveals the "*mise en abyme* structure" which the text in the same breath enacts. So de Man concludes that Benjamin's text dramatizes an untranslatability "which inhabits its own texture and will inhabit anybody who in his turn will try to translate it, as I am now trying, and failing, to do." This untranslatable text "is an example of what it states, it is a *mise en abyme* in the technical sense, a story within the story of what is its own statement" (1986, 86).

Undismayed by this failure which betokens success on another level, de Man next summarizes Benjamin's theory of language, the contradistinction between logos, what is meant (*das Gemeinte*), and lexis, the way language means (*Art des Meinens*). Here de Man insists on a distinction between the phenomenological intentionality of meaning and the non-human (in effect, structural or semiotic) mode of meaning. While the former requires hermeneutic labor, the latter demands poetics; they are mutually exclusive. De Man erroneously thinks that they are purely linguistic for Benjamin. Benjamin postulates a disjunction between

word and sentence, between grammar and meaning. Translation puts the compatibility between grammar and meaning (or rhetoric, for de Man) in question. In a literal translation (like Holderlin's translations of Sophocles), de Man says that the meaning completely disappears because the translation is unintelligible. This slippage of meaning cannot be controlled by grammar (like the word *Aufgabe* "which means task, also means something completely different, so that the word escapes us. What is being named here as the disjunction between grammar and meaning, *Wort* and *Satz*, is the materiality of the letter, the independence, or the way in which the letter can disrupt the ostensibly stable meaning of a sentence and introduce in it a slippage by means of which that meaning disappears, evanesces, and by means of which all control over that meaning is lost" [1986, 89]). Here is de Man's familiar motif of the vertigo of "referential aberration," the aporia or undecidable moment—not to be confused with the indeterminacy of *Rezeptionsästhetik*—presided by the governing trope of irony (1979, 10).

The concluding part of de Man's lecture concentrates on the disjunction between symbol and what is symbolized, between trope and "the meaning as a totalizing power of tropological substitutions." Benjamin uses tropes that convey the illusion of totality, thus contradicting his premise, so that the text "seems to relapse into the tropological errors that it denounces." For example, the text uses analogies whose validity it disclaims: "Whenever Benjamin uses a trope which seems to convey a picture of total meaning, of complete adequacy between figure and meaning, a figure of perfect synecdoche in which the partial trope expresses the totality of a meaning, he manipulates the allusive context within his work in such a way that the traditional symbol is displaced in a manner that acts out the discrepancy between symbol and meaning, rather than the acquiescence between both" (1986, 89). The passage at issue is this:

Fragments of a vessel which 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 resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (1969, 78)

De Man corrects Zohn's version of the last sentence by inserting "broken" before "part of a vessel" so as to prove (by this gesture of emendatory intervention) that fragments remain fragments and will never constitute a totality because they only "follow each other metonymically." Notice how a slippage from referent (object language) to metalanguage renders the line of reasoning suspect. Undisturbed by this, de Man goes on to insist that Benjamin's original intention is to express the

totality of fragments (the greater language) but his use of metonymy in the discourse undermines his literal or grammatical predication.

Nor is this supererogatory gesture enough. De Man even goes on to contend that the translation breaks the fragment (itself) further, so the vessel (if ever there was one whole thing) never appears—"we have no knowledge of this vessel, or no awareness, no access to it, so for all intents and purposes there has never been one" (1986, 91). By a stroke of verbal wish-fulfillment, de Man has made Benjamin's vessel disappear! Accordingly de Man infers from this "the unreliability of rhetoric as a system of tropes which would be productive of a meaning" and the meaning ideally intended by Benjamin is never reached. The freedom of the translation—why not this faulty translation of Zohn too?—may be discerned in its success in disclosing the instability of the original (the linguistic tension between trope and meaning). Trope and meaning cannot coincide or be adequate to each other; and Benjamin demonstrates this by "by displacing them in such a way as to put the original in motion, to de-canonize the original, giving it a movement which is a movement of disintegration, of fragmentation" (1986, 92). The movement of the original is like a permanent exile except there is no homeland (no *reine Sprache*), for de Man. This errancy of language constitutes history; the disjunctive and figural power of poetic language should be distinguished from sacred or pure language. The political and historical spheres exist for purely linguistic reasons. Extrapolating from Benjamin's "Theological and Political Fragment," de Man paradoxically ascribes to Benjamin a non-messianic and non-dialectical conception of history and politics rooted in the stasis of rhetoric and the poetical structure of language (for an antithetical view, see Rosen [1988], Davies [1970]). By this completely unwarranted genealogy, de Man affiliates Benjamin's dialectical nihilism with Nietzsche's perspectivism.

Following this outline I have sketched, de Man's pretext of a commentary turns out to be an argument for the primacy of a quasi-Nietzschean theory of language-use as a form of will to mastery, more exactly a theory of reading that would privilege the rhetorical or tropological dynamics that the critic perceives operating in the text. The reader is the ideal site for the unfolding of aporias, that is, between the performative and constative functions of discourse, between metalinguistic statements and tropological praxis, between synchronic and diachronic permutations. What de Man's analytic style constructs is the rhetorical reader, the ideal subject (according to Ellen Rooney [1989]) of the pluralist problematic of "general persuasion." Given the impossibility of unequivocal meaning and the futility of aiming for a verifiably accurate translation free from "rigorously unreliable" tropes, one might ask then what is the effect of this specific form of reading that relentlessly, even granted its surplus yield of pleasure, pursues its own dissolution, or at least the phantasy of its own death?

I submit that de Man's strategy of reading as epitomized here (a project traversing his career from "Crisis and Criticism" in *Blindness and Insight* to *Allegories of*

Reading) reveal more his ethical and political agenda than the problems and needs Benjamin was grappling with in 1921 when his preface to his translation of Baudelaire was composed. When he deems it expedient, de Man forsakes all contexts—biographical, historical, cultural, and so forth—in the obsessive pursuit of undecidability, a problematic that Benjamin himself tried to resolve in the redemptive or "rescuing" critiques of *Der Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," the Arcades project, and his essays on Baudelaire, Proust, Brecht, Leskov, and others. (The British critic Terry Eagleton [1981], among others, provides a Marxist articulation of Benjamin's utopian materialism in opposition to the Nietzschean/nihilistic and religious construal.) A few facts about Benjamin's situation and his intellectual development would show that de Man's argument is not only an arbitrary superimposition but in effect confirms one thesis of Benjamin concerning the return of a long-submerged mimetic faculty (see Habermas 1988).

During the early period of his career, Benjamin went through the intellectual crisis of responding to the catastrophe of World War I by struggling to formulate an ethics that would transcend the symbolist mysticism of Ludwig Klages and the Stefan George circle. He already felt that Kant's epistemology conceded too much to the claims of a positivist scientism. His crucial 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" postulated a sacred language inherent in the power of naming (God's creative word) as contradistinguished from the profane language of communication (language as signs). Humankind's expulsion from paradise signified a fragmentation of the pure, original language into an impure plurality of languages. With the breakup of this edenic unity of nature and humans, the need for knowledge and interpretation was born. While human language shares the creative, naming function of divine language, it is largely confined to a receptive/cognitive use. This profane use of language for communication springs from the requirements of analytical judgment which obtains after the hierarchy of languages has displaced the "idolatry of nature" present in magical/mythical thought and symbolism; this notion in turn prompted Benjamin to formulate a theory of monadic ideas and the doctrine of anamnesis elaborated in the "tractatus," the literary form designed for the revelation of divine truths (Roberts 1983).

Now it may be observed that the essay on translation conceives language as symbolic only when it performs a naming function (*nennendes Wort*), thus communing with the creative word of God (*schaffendes Wort*); the divine *Ursprache* is immanent in the ontological fate of humans as giver of names. For Benjamin, therefore, the symbolic function, the mimetic iconicity of signs, participates in the divine/sacred language. When humans use language, they translate or give voice to the speechless anonymity of the fallen object world; they transpose the lower language of things (found in sculpture, painting, etc.) into the higher one: the pure, original, seamless totality of linguistic expression. Even literal translation elevates a lower tongue because it sublates it from its degraded communicative level to the

naming sphere of pure language. What de Man calls "meaning" (conventional sign system utilized for judgment, a kind of pragmatic nominalism) is displaced in translation by the "creative word" participating in the realm of what Benjamin (1969) calls "*Lehre*" (doctrine, truth). Translation or commentary preoccupied with the work's subject matter mediates between poetry (naive, intuitive) and *Lehre*, while criticism (*Kritik*) engages with the truth content of the work.

Within this theoretical framework, Benjamin's concept of translation performs not an epistemological but an ethical function in mediating between the sacred and profane, between language as formal individuation through naming and language as signs or even prattle (*Geschwatz*). Situated within Benjamin's notion of "rescuing critique," it seeks to generate a coalescence of subject and object by the utopian, micrological project of deciphering the concealed script (the lost paradisiac language) of redeemed life in the profane texts of art, landscapes, ordinary objects. The ethos of reading and interpretation is thus premised on the historicity of human existence. History, as Benjamin construes it, "is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous time, but time filled by the presence of the Now (*Jetztzeit*)."¹ Surrealism embodied this ethos of writing through the praxis of re-reading. In deciphering the world as a sacred text and decoding the utopian impulse threading the heterogeneous, disconnected instances to trigger a profane illumination, André Breton and Louis Aragon, for example, practised a form of translation whose ethics is for Benjamin (1978) authentically revolutionary.

Both as a reading of what has been written but forgotten, and as a writing-remembrance (anamnesis), translation for Benjamin may thus be conceived as a mode of discovering the secret hieroglyph of a promised happiness—the Messiah's advent, Now-Time—immanent in the historical process. Here we encounter Benjamin's technique of mortification. The significance of an artwork unfolds itself in its afterlife, "a transformation and a renewal of something living" whereby the original undergoes a change—"a maturing process comprehended only from a historical standpoint." Of all literary forms, Benjamin writes, translation "is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own" (1969). Following the principle of mortification applied in the analysis of baroque allegory in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, where truth is captured in the decaying *memento mori* of once beautiful objects, Benjamin suggests through Biblical allusion the difference between commentary and translation:

Commentary and translation stand in the same relation to the text as style and mimesis to nature: the same phenomenon considered from different aspects. On the tree of the sacred text both are only the eternally rustling leaves; on that of the profane, the seasonally falling fruits. (1978, 68)

In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin posits the telos of writing in their "perpetual renewal" through translation as an act of re-reading and re-writing mediated through the rhythm of temporality and death. Translation envisages tracking hidden correspondences and analogies that adumbrate "the predestined, hitherto inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages," that is, the dissolution of Babel and the messianic restoration of the Divine Kingdom. This is anticipated in the 1916 essay on language: "The language of things can pass into the language of knowledge and name only through translation—as many translations, so many languages—once man has fallen from the paradisiac state that knew only one language" (1978, 326). By ignoring Benjamin's complex thinking on language, de Man can thus easily erase the key concept of *reine Sprache* (figured as an unbroken vessel) in a gesture of insinuating his own nihilism into the text, thus precipitating the fall which he accuses Benjamin's translators (in their guise as commentators) of being guilty.

The paramount aim of translation and, by implication all interpretation, is the recovery of that sacred language of naming, the fusion of cognition and creation, which lies embedded in all phenomena viewed as signs, indices, or icons. Benjamin defines the task of the translator as, in essence, the articulation of intertextuality (what Bakhtin/Voloshinov calls "utterance" as event with polyphonic or dialogic resonance) that registers the "echo of the original." The translator aims at the totality of the languages he is dealing with; he aims for that "single spot" where the reverberation of the original can be generated in his own. Whereas the intention of the poet is "spontaneous, primary, graphic" in that he confronts "specific linguistic contextual aspects," the translator's intention is "derivative, ultimate, ideational." The ultimate and ideational burden of translation depends not on the reproduction of the sense (ideas, judgment, meaning) but on its detailed and loving "incorporation of the original's mode of signification." This mode is the naming power of prelapsarian *Ursprache*. Not exactly surrogates of one another, both original and translation are fragments of the "one true language" before the "Breaking of the Vessels" (marking the entry of evil in the Kabbalah). The rhetorical figure Benjamin uses is infelicitous not because it is masquerading as metaphor, contrary to what de Man alleges, but because the fragments are supposed to be harmonized (note the valorization of sound over sight), losing their isolated existence as parts. Immediately Benjamin shifts to the musical trope: "as regards the meaning, the language of a translation can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original not as reproduction but as harmony, as a supplement to the language in which it expresses itself, as its own kind of *intentio*" (1969, 78–79). Hence literalness or faithfulness to the materiality of the signifiers betokens the work's "great longing for linguistic complementation." The succeeding passage refutes de Man's thesis that word, the materiality of the letter, can disrupt the stable meaning of a sentence, when it points out that the "literal rendering of the syntax" makes the real translation transparent: "it 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."

In its refusal to reproduce the sense or paraphrase the cognitive content of the original, the literal translation seizes only the mode of a text's temporal existence, its "magical immanentism." In the 1933 text "On the Mimetic Faculty," Benjamin propounds his concept of language as rationalized mimesis which fills in the gaps of the 1923 essay (see Rabinbach 1979):

For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that thing as their center, we have to inquire how they all—while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another—are similar to what they signify at their center. . . . In brief, it is nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties not only between the spoken and the signified but also between the written and the signified, and equally between the spoken and the written. . . . Script has thus become, like language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.

This aspect of language as script, however, does not develop in isolation from its other, 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 coherence 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, limited to flashes. It flits past. It is not improbable that the rapidity of writing and reading heightens the fusion of the semiotic and the mimetic in the sphere of language. (1978, 335–36)

Literalness or the focus on what Brecht would call the "gestic" dimension of language, Benjamin suggests, is "the arcade into the language of the original" surrounded by the wall of the sentence. Literalness which abjures direct transcript of denotation yields freedom in a perfectly straightforward sense: "For what is meant by freedom but that the rendering of sense is no longer to be regarded as all-important?" Literalness then is not the exchange of cognitive, semantic content but a hermeneutic deciphering where nonsensuous similarities (the presence of the mimetic in the semiotic) can be registered. This inflects St. Jerome's classic rule of nonliteralness: "*Non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu*" (Frenz 1973). Human language, for Benjamin, constitutes the world as a context of meanings; human language is only a particular form of universal "language as such" which embodies all essences. Translation is then the polylogue or colloquy of various expressions—art, dancing, astrology, and so on—that incarnate the immanent but also transcendent logos.

This is the point where Benjamin's messianic agenda surfaces, underscored in the concluding paragraph of "The Task of the Translator" where the Holy Writ reconciles language and revelation, where the text is identical with truth or dogma, where servitude to the original and loose adaptation coalesce in the interlinear version of the Scripture, the prototype of all translation. Holderlin's translation where meaning "is touched upon only fleetingly, like the aeolian harp by the wind," resembles the tangent (described earlier) that "touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux." This conjunction of freedom and fidelity, however, can lead to the gates of language enclosing the translator with silence. Another way of restaging this enigmatic denouement may be found in Benjamin's characterization of Holderlin's translations of Sophocles: "in them meaning plunges from abyss to abyss until it threatens to become lost in the bottomless depths of language."² While the trope here may be read as dramatizing the notion that pure language "inhabits linguistic creations only in symbolized form," Benjamin is not rehearsing the *mise en abyme* of an astute rhetorical demystification; rather, the figure of flux anticipates the idea of the secret mimetic potency of language posited in "On the Mimetic Faculty," an idea "strongly reminiscent of the "dialectical image" researched in Benjamin's *Passagenarbeit* (Wolin 1982).

We can now return to de Man's reading with the judgment that it not only instrumentalizes Benjamin's text but also inflicts a calculated violence on its ideas and words. In a typical maneuver, de Man fragments his source text when he thematizes the disjunction of Being and meaning, what is symbolized and the symbol, a cleavage which he claims to see in the text and whose rationale he attributes to the author's indecisiveness, a vacillation of motives between what he intends (hypothetical) and what the text enacts.³ For example, de Man argues that for Benjamin, the symbol and what it symbolizes do not correspond. The passage in question, however, pursues in a subtle dialectical manner the mediations between these two polarities since languages are not self-contained differential systems (as one version of Saussurean linguistics asserts) but "media of varying intensities" in "a continuum of transformations." It stresses, in particular, the necessary ethical imperative of a totalizing vision—the philosopher's task of comprehension through a historical remembrance, the critic's quest for redemptive meaning inscribed in the "flashing image" that signals the reconciliation of man and nature:

2. Compare the erotically invested imagery here with Adorno's portrait of Benjamin: "Subjectivity, plunging into the abyss of significances, 'becomes the ceremonial guarantee of the miracle because it announces divine action itself'" (1967, 231).

3. Both Juhl (1984), Ray (1984), and Seung (1982) discern certain effects of the hermeneutic circle in de Man's reading practice. For more sympathetic appraisals, see Leitch (1983), Culler (1982), and Norris (1988) who all mount a spirited defense of de Man's "linguistics."

In all language and linguistic creations there remains in addition to what can be conveyed something that cannot be communicated; depending on the context in which it appears. It is something that symbolizes or something symbolized. . . . While that ultimate essence, pure language, in the various tongues is tied only to linguistic elements and their changes, in linguistic creations it is weighted with a heavy, alien meaning. To relieve it of this, to turn the symbolizing into the symbolized, to regain pure language fully formed in the linguistic flux, is the tremendous and only capacity of translation. . . . It is the task of the translator to release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work. For the sake of pure language he breaks through decayed barriers of his own language. (1969, 79–80)

What is at stake here is the liberation of "pure language" under the magic spell of a decaying one, the emancipation of repressed energies contained in the source text. The polemical, even moralizing tenor, of the tropes here strongly repel the contagion of vertiginous irony. Here the antinomy of freedom and necessity (fidelity) is played out when pure language is conceived as the locus where the profane world of thinking and communication is extinguished, an extinction brought about by the demand of fidelity (the index of an ethical vocation) which dissolves sense/meaning. Allegorizing translation, for Benjamin, performs a redemptive vocation: to release the pure language imprisoned in the original, and in doing so destroy also the "decayed barriers" of the target language. This converts the symbolized form reified in "finite linguistic products" into the fragmentary and concealed symbol active in life. Pure language inheres in linguistic elements in the diverse tongues, while in art it is submerged in alien meaning. To turn the symbolizing process (in the natural realm) into the symbolized, what Benjamin calls the end/purpose of life in the "representation of its significance," is the task of the translator. Here, ultimately, the translator is the messianic figure whose problematic text is "unconditionally translatable" and whose release from the spell of aporia, the impasse of indeterminacy, marks the watershed for the flow of revelation's utterance.

What calls for close scrutiny is the key exhibit de Man presents for converting Benjamin into a precursor of deconstructive reading, namely, this passage where texts are likened to fragments of a vessel:

Wie nämlich Scherben eines Gefäßes, um sich zusammenfügen zu lassen, in den kleinsten Einzelheiten einander zu folgen, doch nicht so zu gleichen haben, so muss, anstatt dem Sinn des Originals sich ähnlich zu machen, die Übersetzung liebend vielmehr und bis ins Einzelne hinein dessen Art des Meinens in der eigenen Sprache sich an bilden, um

so beide wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefässes, als Bruchstück einer grösseren Sprache erkennbar zu machen. (1972, 18)

Fragments of a vessel which 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 resembling the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel. (1969, 78)

De Man corrects Zohn's translation of the first sentence by preferring Carol Jacobs' translation of "fragments of a vessel, in order to be *articulated* together must follow one another in the smallest detail." "Articulated together" instead of "glued together" or "join together" insinuates a differential or diacritical connotation, while "follow" instead of "match" allows de Man to assert that the text displays "a metonymic, a successive pattern, in which things follow, rather than a metaphorical unifying pattern in which things become one by resemblance." What this translation seeks to avoid, de Man alleges, is "a convincing tropological totalization." De Man further insists that what Benjamin says in the last sentence is that the fragments "are the broken parts" of a vessel: "he says the fragments are fragments, and that they remain essentially fragmentary. They follow each other up, metonymically, and they will never constitute a totality" (1986, 91). Not only are all translations fragments, but the vessel is constantly breaking—in fact "there was no vessel in the first place"! This pronouncement of closure signals a breakdown in the coherence of de Man's argument since, in the first place, he acknowledges the scriptural reference to the "Breaking of the Vessels" in the lore of the Lurianic Kaballah only to set it aside. And, second, the term "fragments" does not constitute metonymy nor synecdoche by itself. What the passage presents obviously is a simile or comparison: the whole phrase "broken parts of a vessel" concretizes "broken parts of the greater language." So that for de Man to acknowledge the "broken parts" and ignore the whole of which they are parts is to refuse the evidence of metaphor and its drive toward synthesis, correspondence, totality, via remembrance or anamnesis. It is a telling evidence of (to use de Man's own terms) the blindness of his insight, a blindness to what Benjamin would later conceive as "nonsensuous similarity" apprehended by a topological (not tropological) mapping of the configuration of appearances that may cut the fissure for the "instantaneous flash" of messianic grace (Wohlfahrt 1979).

Is this simply a careless misreading on de Man's part caused by an attitude heedless of contexts, oblivious to Benjamin's intentionality of understanding and beliefs, caught in the hubris of a transcendental skepticism (my phrase) which he, as if through a mirror-image, imputes to others in "The Resistance to Theory"? I

don't think so because this pattern of premeditated or doubled misunderstanding may be found replicated by his erstwhile colleague at Yale University, J. Hillis Miller, whose reading of the same text evokes a similar adventurism, a strategic maneuvering that aims to sabotage any project with epistemological claims and semantic determinations.

In *The Ethics of Reading*, Miller notes that the figure of the broken parts of the vessel is unintelligible as "description of a physical phenomena, though its impossibility as literal description may be what makes it work as a figurative description of a linguistic fact" (1987, 124). On second thought, Miller applies a scholastic standard of adequation between thing and word when he judges that the image "does not correspond" to Benjamin's concept of "a pure language." In other words, there is a discrepancy between what Benjamin wants to convey, namely, that both original and translation are bad translations of a lost original, and the image which is "an impossible metaphor." Miller thus concludes: "It fails to carry the meaning that is entrusted to it, since the fragments must fit and not fit, and they must both be parts of a greater vessel and not part of that vessel. That vessel has no shape and no meaning, since it is the place where all information, all sense, all shape, and all intention are extinguished in the expressionless word (or Word)" (1987, 125–26).

It is remarkable how Miller's mystifying and mystified attitude to the vessel repeats de Man's terror at its presence, or its putative existence. Both surreptitiously deploy an apparatus of linguistic axioms that erases history or reduces it to another text, a modality of performative figuration. Unlike de Man, however, Miller confesses bafflement at the meaning of "*reine Sprache*," compelling him to reduce it to "the equivalent, the translation into another idiom, of what Henry James means by "thing" or "matter." Then he reconceives it as the "paradox of a wordless word" generating an effect of unreadability or undecidability. Is this not evidence of a reductive will on the part of the deconstructionist to thematize and so instrumentalize the testimony of Benjamin's disclosure? Given our understanding of Benjamin's conception of the difference between sacred and profane languages, Miller's interpretation is starkly inadequate not because it is profane language (thus inadvertently validating Benjamin's theory) but simply because it dispenses with Benjamin's horizon of intentionality, in particular his controlling narrative of the fragmentation of languages in man's fall into knowledge—the genesis of the communicating word, "a parody . . . of the expressly immediate, the creative word of God"—and the possibility of recuperating the "intensive totality of language" incarnate in man as namer. Miller's ethics of masterful reading is rendered suspect by Benjamin's affirmation of a metanarrative or totalizing vision of the communication process:

[I]n man God set language, which had served *Him* as medium of creation, free. God rested when he had left his creative power to itself in man. This creativity, relieved of its divine actuality, became knowledge.

Man is the knower in the same language in which God is creator. God created him in his image, he created the knower in the image of the creator. Therefore the proposition that the mental being of man is language needs explanation. His mental being is the language in which creation took place. In the word creation took place, and God's linguistic being is the word. All human language is only reflection of the word in name. . . .

Translation attains its full meaning in the realization that every evolved language (with the exception of the word of God) can be considered as a translation of all the others. By the relation, mentioned earlier, of languages as between media of varying densities, the translatability of languages into another is established. Translation is removal from one language into another through a continuum of transformations. Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity. (1978, 323–25)

In the latter passage, translation as a continuum of transformations spans the whole spectrum from literal fidelity to free translation or "imitations" (such as those witnessed by Borges' translators, by Robert Lowell's or Ezra Pound's practice). This idea qualifies the contested notion of translation as producing fragmentary copies of an unmediated or self-identical, homogeneous text.

Given Benjamin's conception of the disparity between sacred and profane languages, it now becomes clear how de Man's interpretation proves starkly inadequate if not wayward because it dispenses with Benjamin's horizon of intentionality, in particular his controlling narrative of the fragmentation of languages in man's fall into knowledge, the event which inaugurates the genesis of the communicating word. Benjamin believes in the possibility of recuperating the "intensive totality of language" incarnate in man as namer. Therefore translation is possible and every translation is successful, given the communion of tongues projected in the utopian ideal of a plenitude of meaning (for example, poetry as naming) recuperable from the *Jetztzeit* incarnate in ruins, relics, fragments, traces—precisely the waste and detritus of social life taken by de Man and Miller as tokens of undecidability. Phrased another way, in the wake of the Lacan–Derrida exchange (Johnson 1981), Benjamin's "letter" always arrives at its destination. To appreciate what this implies, it is necessary that the hermeneutic circle be broken by a kind of reading which revitalizes a decayed mimetic faculty—the matrix of Benjamin's poetics of redemption:

"To read what was never written." Such reading is the most ancient: reading before all languages, from the entrails, the stars, or dances. Later the mediating link of a new kind of reading, of runes and hieroglyphs, came into use. It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, which was once the foundation of occult prac-

tices, gained admittance to writing and language. In this way language may be seen 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, to the point where they have liquidated those of magic. (1978, 336)

Reading as mimesis or creative reproduction: for Miller and de Man, Benjamin has just invented another trope, the figure of representation, that will ineluctably self-deconstruct "under the laborious task of a scrupulous slow reading."

In a programmatic essay "The Search for Grounds in Literary Study," Miller judged that every "conceivable representation of the relations of words to things, powers, persons, modes of production and exchange, juridical or political systems" will be revealed as another figure of speech. Ideology, for example, turns out to be anamorphosis for Miller, "a species of affirmation by denial, abnegation, what Freud called *Verneinung*" (1989, 823). It would be instructive to sketch in passing how Miller illustrates the pitfall of this rhetorical reading in his statement that "In Marxist theory, for example that of Louis Althusser in *For Marx*, ideology is the name given to the imaginary structures, whereby men and women resist facing directly the real economic and social conditions of their existence." From Althusser's vantage point of symptomatic reading, Miller's ascription of resistance to humans which is absent in the original definition betrays an unconsciousness of his own motives.⁴ The specter of "false consciousness" always attached to a vulgarized version of Marxism exposes the limits of a rhetorical critique of ideology. This claim to deserve our trust based on the assumption of a hegemonic liberal pluralism that casts a patronizing aura of tolerance enables deconstruction to interrogate all foundations—except the linguistic—and uphold the fetish of an unconceptualizable arche-writing which legitimates itself. But, as Paul Ricoeur (1978) has noted, this closure of the universe of signs by dispensing with the referent, bypassing the decisive event of enunciation (the upsurge of the speaking subject), and confining oneself to the effects of a system of internal differential relations, "an autonomous entity of internal dependencies," only succumbs to that metaphysics of reification which the deconstructive skeptics are purportedly trying to avoid in the first place. Clearly the reductive simplification of this reading, and its privileging of antinomies and interminable equivocations which induce infinite regress in a timeless synchrony, has the singular virtue of escaping the methodical doubt of its practitioner. Meanwhile, naive readers outside the circle of the enlightened presumably continue to suffer as victims of a metaphysical fallacy: that of confusing the repre-

4. Althusser's definition of ideology cited by Miller is found in the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1971), not in *For Marx*.

sentational function of language with phenomena, things, meanings, signifieds—all illusory presences.⁵

In a manifesto of his later period, "The Resistance to Theory," de Man negates the validity of literature's mimetic and epistemological claims and questions "its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition." What literary theory should be concerned with, according to De Man, is the refusal of historical and aesthetic signification so that it can address not "the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment—the implication being that this establishment is problematic enough to require an autonomous discipline of critical investigation to consider its possibility and its status" (1986, 7). Here De Man privileges the vocation of the theorist as one who somehow salvages "a knowledge" from ideology by unmasking it, stressing that "it is no longer possible to ignore the epistemological thrust of the rhetorical dimension of discourse."

An excess of theory soon transgresses the boundaries of the disciplinary regime. The ethical imperative surfaces in de Man's riposte to his critics when he arrogates to his methodology a salvific mission: "What we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenism. It follows that, more than any other mode of inquiry, including economics, the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence" (1986, 11). The definition of "ideology" here, in a replay of Miller's obsession, evinces a pathetic naivete and poverty reminiscent of the "false consciousness" of vulgar Marxism which deconstructionists are fond of attacking. Despite the self-defensive assertion at the end that theory contains within itself the "language of self-resistance," a compensatory move to ward off any charge of being self-uncritical or unreflexive, de Man all the same valorizes the performative, the rhetorical displacements that language wreaks on grammatical cognition, speech act-oriented theories, reader response, and so on, including the claim of language to be a perfect model of anything.

We now begin to suspect, without thoroughly unpacking our dossier of queries and reservations, that de Man's rhetorical methodology and criteria of judgment premised on the "linguistics of literariness" are ultimately sustained by a Nietzschean perspectivism and by the logic of a nominalistic relativism armed with self-reflexive irony. It implies an ideological closure diametrically opposed to

5. Foley (1985) summarizes previous criticisms by Lentricchia, Said, and others. She seems to follow Brecht's advice (recorded by Benjamin) to mobilize "*das plumpe Denken*" in her vigorous polemic against the claims of deconstruction; but her notion of Marxism is undialectical and suffers from a lack of thick historical mediations—an inadequacy that Adorno noticed also in certain writings of Benjamin. But Benjamin's own "Marxism" is still a contested topic, perhaps ultimately undecidable?

Benjamin's practice of immanent critique, of critique as "mortification." While it may be shown quite convincingly that de Man is not really demonstrating anything true or false—just as Fish, caught in a tighter hermeneutic circle of shifting interpretive communities, is also persuading his co-believers of nothing really substantial in his perlocutionary rituals—I would prefer to endorse Julia Kristeva's critical stance, her caveat that "there is an *other* besides the irony of the learned man; there is . . . *rhythm, death, and future*" (1980, 27). With such an ethical commitment entailed by one's inescapable accountability to others, Benjamin conceived of the critic's responsibility "to brush history against the grain" by considering in a dialectical fashion every text to be read and translated as a document not only of civilization but also of barbarism.

But can this duplicity be extended to cover the scandal of the Belgian Nazi sympathizer of 1940–42? By hindsight, Jonathan Culler (1988) explains that the mature de Man's repudiation of aesthetic ideology, totalizing metaphors, and anthropomorphizing organic unity may be interpreted as lessons gained from that wartime experience and the distance of time. Of course this is to posit that impossible self-coincidence, the reconciliation of incompatibles, already ruled out by de Man's insistence on our temporal predicament. De Man himself has endeavored to expose all claims to self-possession and unmediated identity as some kind of unwarranted violence on the "human condition." But logocentrism seems to take its disingenuous revenge here. Witness to this is Alasdair MacIntyre (1990), who points out that the attempt by de Man's apologists to vindicate the moral credibility of his later standpoint has been made on the basis of a conception of moral accountability "deeply at odds" with de Man's genealogical authority. Invoking de Man's dictum that language "dissociates the cognition from the act" (1979, 277), can we then accept a plausible narrative of the rift between the young fascist sympathizer and the old allegorist of irony? And if we deconstruct the hierarchy between the ironic antihumanist and the romantic nationalist, assuming that those personae can be ascribed to the same persisting body, shall we obtain an equalizing "difference" of presence/absence? And what do all these propositions signify if play, trace, and the abyss deprive us of any ground for a consensus of judgment; and, more portentously, whatever we say and do now becomes unsaid and undone in the same breath?

What is ultimately at stake lies in the space/time permitted for articulating those questions: the freedom or violation of the speaking/reading subject, its subordination to coercive agencies or its liberation. Perhaps Kristeva would then ask: what then is the ethics of deconstructive irony? We arrive at this crossroad where it is indeed difficult to resist the position that this "exorbitation" of the linguistic model (however seminal and provocatively challenging the insights that Derrida, de Man, and their epigones might gather in their textual explorations) has not only liberated us from the curse of origin, presence, God, the subject, reason, history, and truth—ideals long cherished as the blessings of Western civilization. It has also

released us from the responsibility to the claims of the multitudes and their suffering, bewitched as we are by the seductive illusions of this subaltern science called tropological reading, grammatology, or textual archaeology to which the old-fashioned Benjamin, ever the believer that translators (even the outlandish fabricators imagined by Borges) cannot betray, alludes in a letter to the poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal: "every truth has its home, its ancestral palace, in language, that it is erected from the oldest *logoi*, and in face of a truth established in this way the insights of the individual sciences remain subaltern, as long as they, so to speak, nomadically here and there make use of the realm of language, preoccupied with that view of the sign-character of language whose irresponsible arbitrariness impresses itself on their terminology" (Wolin 1982, 41).