



# Divine Words, Cramped Actions: Walter Benjamin — an Unlikely Icon in Translation Studies

## Mots divins, actes restreints : Walter Benjamin — une figure icônique paradoxale en traductologie

Janet Sanders

Volume 16, Number 1, 1er semestre 2003

Controverse en traductologie  
Controversy in Translation Studies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/008561ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/008561ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (print)  
1708-2188 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Sanders, J. (2003). Divine Words, Cramped Actions: Walter Benjamin — an Unlikely Icon in Translation Studies. *TTR*, 16(1), 161–183.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/008561ar>

Article abstract

For the last half century Walter Benjamin has had almost legendary status in the world of translation studies. Scholars have been fascinated by the ideas in *The Task of the Translator*, but almost none has looked at how—or even whether—Benjamin actualized his philosophy, either in his own practice of translation or in his criticism of translations by others. This is the purpose of the present article.

# Divine Words, Cramped Actions: Walter Benjamin — an Unlikely Icon in Translation Studies

**Janet Sanders**

## **Introduction**

Benjamin's place in the canon of twentieth-century critical theorists is indisputable. Many leading translation scholars have acknowledged his influence on their thinking, including Berman (most cogently), De Man, Derrida, Barthes and the deconstructionist movement, Meschonnic, Steiner and, among more recent scholars, Haroldo de Campos, Eric Cheyfitz, Lawrence Venuti and Suzanne-Jill Levine.

The thrust of research by translation scholars has been concerned with Benjamin the philosopher, as opposed to Benjamin the translator. One only has to think of the research by leading Benjamin scholars like Alexis Nouss, Carol Jacobs, Stéphane Mosès and Rainer Rochlitz to see the truth of this. In his article on the French reception of Benjamin's essay, « *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* », Nouss wrote: "... l'essai de Benjamin est proprement philosophique et, à ce titre, demande à être situé, y compris en traductologie, à la fois dans l'histoire de la philosophie et dans l'horizon global de la pensée benjaminienne." (Nouss, 1997, p. 72) For Benjamin, translation was merely one of a number of elements in the development of his philosophical thinking.

However, although the thrust of both Benjamin's essay and translation research into it is philosophical, it is difficult to explain away his choice of the word "task" in the title, denoting as it does "a

piece of work to be done or undertaken” (Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998), hence practice. In a footnote reference Berman, significantly, puts into quotation marks the word *tâche* in the phrase “*tâche*” *du traducteur*. (1985, p. 87)

Scholars in the Humanities are often most comfortable with theory, eschewing practical concerns. We often drink deep of “the poisoned chalice of abstraction.”<sup>1</sup> The debate about theory versus practice is vexing and perennial. Antoine Berman was one of a minority who did not avert his gaze from the issue. He preferred the nuanced terms “*réflexion et expérience*” above “*théorie et pratique*”, because “*La traduction peut fort bien se passer de théorie, non de pensée.*” (1985, p. 39) In his life and work he exemplified the link between reflection on and the practice of translation.

There are, of course, those who contend that pure theory is valid in and of itself, that paucity of translation output is not a disqualification for theorizing about translation. Störig, for instance, contends that there are two categories of thinkers who are entitled to theorize. The first category includes great translators *per se*, as well as great poets who are also great translators. The second category consists of philosophers and linguists. Benjamin clearly belongs to the second. Störig—not entirely convincingly—believes that the latter have a “say in the matter”, because the focus of twentieth century philosophy has been language. (Störig, 1963, xxv) Even so, the leap from having a “say in the matter” to acquiring a seat “*au panthéon des grandes figures mythico-culturelles*” (Nous, 1997, p. 71) is formidable.

In his Marxist phase Benjamin appears to have discounted the value of theory not actualized in practice. He wrote, “*An author who teaches writers nothing teaches no-one.* What matters, therefore, is the exemplary character of the production, which is able, first, to induce other producers to produce, and second, to put an improved apparatus at their disposal. And this apparatus is better the more consumers it is able to turn into producers ... .” (Jennings, 1999, p. 777; emphasis in the original)

It must be admitted that—at another time and in another place—Benjamin had held the contrary view. He could flatly

---

<sup>1</sup> Phrase used by Prof. Colin Duncan in a talk given to the Montreal British History Seminar on January 16, 2003.

contradict himself when his thinking and interests changed. His friend, Hannah Arendt, felt that he was repelled by the thought of being a useful member of society and would probably have echoed Baudelaire's "Être un homme utile m'a toujours paru quelque chose de bien hideux." (Arendt, 1968, p. 205)

There are several reasons why so many scholars have regarded Benjamin as an icon of translation theory, but neglected to examine the quality both of his own practice and his assessments of translations by others.

First, the philosophical speculations in *The Task of the Translator* are such a heady cultural cocktail (Kahn, 1993, p. 236) that Benjamin has become "one of the most provocative agents of speculative discussion in translation studies." (Gaddis-Rose, 1982, p. 18)

Secondly, it is satisfying to have as a translation icon a writer as illustrious as Benjamin. He is widely considered to be one of the most seminal philosophical and cultural critics in the German language between the wars. (Meyer, 1998, p. 187) He is cited by Marxists, linguists, philosophers and political and social scientists.

Thirdly, Benjamin is eminently quotable and his style, as Scholem pointed out, is mesmerizing: "authoritative sentences ... lending themselves to quotation and interpretation. What is illuminating in them is meshed with the thoroughly enigmatic." (Scholem, 1971, pp. 50-51) What this boils down to, of course, is that Benjamin can be made to say almost anything one wants him to say.

Hence Benjamin has frequently been appropriated "non sans ambiguïté et parfois en toute méconnaissance". (Nouss, 1997, p. 71 *seq.*) Some translation scholars have adopted him so enthusiastically that they have been inaccurate, if not downright misinformed. Irving Wohlfarth (Venuti, 1992, p. 86) and Jeffrey Mehlman (*ibid.*, p. 87) have respectively attributed to Benjamin "pure language" and the metaphor of translation as the assembling of fragments of a vessel, whereas both ideas originate in the Kabbalah. Steiner terms Benjamin an "exegetist" (Steiner, 1998, p. 63), whereas in no wise did Benjamin provide a critical explanation of Scripture. Kelly, like many scholars, cannot resist the temptation to make Benjamin sound more purposeful than he was. He mentions "Heidegger, Benjamin and their colleagues"

and “hermeneutics as taught by Heidegger, Benjamin (1923) and Steiner (1975).” (1979, pp. 30-31; emphasis added.) Carol Jacobs erroneously calls the Baudelaire translation “... the difficult task *which claimed so many years of Benjamin’s life.*” (Jacobs, 1975, p. 755; emphasis added.) In fact, those years were filled with many other activities besides this task. Very few writers have questioned whether the emperor is wearing **all** his clothes, Venuti being a signal exception. He notes in a sceptical aside, “*Whatever meaning may be assigned to Benjamin’s notion of ‘pure language’ ...*” (Venuti, 1992, p. 8; emphasis added)

The purpose of *The Task of the Translator*, the sole work on which Benjamin’s reputation as a translation theorist rests, has often been misunderstood. For instance, John Johnston says that *The Task of the Translator* “now stands out as a quintessentially modernist attempt to formulate a theory of translation, perhaps as the (*sic*) modernist theory of translation.” (*Ibid.*, p. 42) However, despite its title, *The Task of the Translator* is really a presentation of the mystique of translating and not a formulation of its theory or practice. Benjamin himself never intended it to be a translation handbook. He described it as “actually theoretical and quite general.” (*Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 889) In retrospect, probably in 1940, he termed it “the first expression of my theoretical *reflections* on language.” (*ibid.*, p. 891; emphasis added)

The worst example of misinformation is, in my opinion, Cheyfitz’s assessment of Benjamin’s contribution to modern translation studies. He identifies Benjamin’s “pure language” as denoting a resistance to colonial imperialism in that “he seems to project into the aesthetic realm what we have read the *translatio imperii et studii* projecting in the historical realm: the homogenization of all languages in a universal language.” Cheyfitz adds that his vision is “democratized” as it is not based, as was the *translatio*, on a hierarchical division of languages and that he “keeps the democratic interplay of voices alive in a vision that has a profound respect for the foreign.” (Cheyfitz, 1997, pp. 134-135)

This verges on the preposterous, as, except for his fling with Marxism, Benjamin was always an aesthete and “homogenization” of any sort would have been anathema to him. Also, when he wrote *The Task of the Translator* he had not entered his idiosyncratically Marxist phase and political considerations were not yet in the forefront of his mind. Cheyfitz finally shoots himself in the foot when he says,

“Quoting Pannwitz Benjamin gives us a concise history of the ideology of translation in the West.” Firstly, it is Pannwitz who provides the said “concise history” and, secondly, the quoted paragraphs do not remotely qualify either as history or as ideology.

To my knowledge, the only two scholars who have looked at Benjamin’s own output to see whether there was a link between his theory in *The Task of the Translator* and his praxis are Stephen Rendall (1997) and Marilyn Gaddis-Rose (1982), who will be quoted later in this article. Most of the studies in the 1997 issue of *TTR* devoted to Benjamin focus on what he is actually saying in *The Task of the Translator*; there are none on whether he successfully actualized his thinking.

Benjamin did not seek the status of translation icon; it was conferred on him by scholars. The purpose of this article is to question the validity of that status as regards his practice — or experience, if you will — of translation. This will be undertaken first through a discussion of Benjamin’s motives for undertaking translation work, as the relationship between one’s motivation for doing a task and the ultimate success thereof is generally close. Then will follow assessments of Benjamin’s translations, both by himself and contemporaries, with a view of discovering whether or not they measure up to his self-imposed ideals in *The Task of the Translator*. Lastly, attention will be turned to his critiques of other people’s translations to see whether they conform to his own translational belief system.

### **Benjamin’s motivation**

Benjamin’s motivation for translation was a far cry from the concept of translation as propounded in *The Task of the Translator*, namely a quasi-mystical vocation, with evocations of aeolian harps and Kabbalistic resonances concerning the restoration of “pure language”. He generally undertook translation for extraneous reasons, such as philosophical and economic, rather than because he was passionate about it. His output was sporadic and was not hailed by the public; he provided no detailed commentary on the process; he did not particularly enjoy it and his critiques of translations by others tended to be literary, not translational.

The seeds of his disenchantment may always have been present. Douglas Robinson sees hopelessness at the core of *The Task of*

*the Translator*. (1991, p. 91) Nouss and Lamy have picked up on De Man's idea of "*Aufgabe*" in the original title denoting not only "task" but "surrender" or "*abandon*". (1997, pp. 13-69)

Moreover, Benjamin was not particularly interested in communication — a major drawback for a translator, since translation is essentially communication. He is explicit in *The Task of the Translator* that the target audience of translation is unimportant.

Benjamin tended to regard translation as little more than badly-paid hack-work. In September 1924 he wrote "I have translated *Ursule Mirouet* over weeks of terrible drudgery." (*Correspondence*, 1994, p. 249) It was at times a form of self-mortification for him. In April 1926 his routine for getting through his translating work sounds punitive. "I have discovered a regimen that magically entices the goblins to get out. It consists of my sitting down to work as soon as I get up in the morning, without getting dressed, without moistening my hands or body with a single drop of water, indeed without even drinking any. And I do nothing, much less eat breakfast, before finishing the task I set myself for the day. ... I can then do *what I want* in the afternoon." (*ibid.*, p. 297; emphasis added)

As early as June 1927 he had become thoroughly disenchanted with the practice of translation, "I think I have come to understand that every translation that is not undertaken for the highest and most urgent practical goals (like Biblical translation, as a prime example) or for the sake of purely philological research must have something absurd about it." (*ibid.*, p. 315) This may have been written in a moment of frustration, since it is a total about-face from his consistently held reservations about the historical justification for Biblical translation. However, his charge of absurdity is consonant with his ambivalent attitude to the task of the translator.

His dismissive attitude may have had much to do with his personality. In 1915 Dora Pollak, who was to become his wife two years later, observed, "His words are grand and divine, his thoughts and works significant, his feelings petty and cramped, and his actions of a sort to correspond to all this." (Jennings, 1999, p. 834) Scholem, too, noticed early in the friendship that "Benjamin's life did not have that enormous measure of purity that distinguished his thought." (Scholem, 1981, p. 53)

As we shall see in the next section, Benjamin clearly cared about translation as a vehicle for personal growth, enabling him to explore key motifs in his own thinking, whether philosophical or aesthetic; his words and thoughts — “grand and divine” — were situated at a high level of abstraction. Conversely, his motivation for the actual translation of a given text was often “petty and cramped”, being for financial, social or personal advantage. His lack of interest in systematizing the nuts and bolts of translating is evident both in his own work and in his critiques of the work of others.

### Benjamin’s translations

Benjamin’s best-known translations are those of Baudelaire, Proust and St. John Perse; they will be dealt with below. His other translations were so uneventful that the following list required some excavation to draw up. The main source was his *Correspondence* (1994), followed by Brodersen (1996) and Leinweber (no date).

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| 1924 | Translation of what Benjamin terms a “blague” ( <i>Correspondence</i> , 1994, p. 249), <i>La photo de l’envers</i> , by the surrealist poet, Tristan Tzara, in <i>Die Zeitschifte für elementare Gestaltung</i> . Four Baudelaire poems in the short-lived magazine <i>Vers und Prosa</i> . |
| 1925 | Publication of Balzac’s <i>Ursule Mirouet</i> , only the first part of which Benjamin had translated.   |
| 1926 | Translation of a piece by D’Annunzio, which appeared in the Berlin periodical <i>Der Querschnitt</i> as <i>Der göttlichen Eleonora Duse</i> . This translation is “singularly curious in that Benjamin knew, as he himself admitted, scarcely any Italian.” (Brodersen, 1996, p. 164)       |
| 1928 | Publication of part of Aragon’s <i>Le Paysan de Paris</i> in <i>Die literarische Welt</i> , the literary house journal of <i>Die Frankfurter Zeitung</i> .  |
| 1929 | Translation of Jouhandeau’s long novella, <i>Le Marié du village</i> , in <i>Die neue Schweizer Rundschau</i> .   |

- 1930 Introduction and translation of Léon Bloy's lecture on Proust in *Die literarische Welt*, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Ruskin's death. Also, two contributions to an anthology of French short story writers, which appeared under the title of *Neue französische Erzähler*.
- 1932 Three translations, Léon Bloy's *Exégèses des lieux communs* and Jouhandeau's *La Bergère de Nanou*, again in *Die literarische Welt*, and Adrienne Monnier's *La Vierge sage* in *Die Kölnische Zeitung*.

This ends the list of Benjamin's translations from French. Henceforth he was concerned, often facetiously, with overseeing other people's translations of his own work into French, particularly that of the autobiographical *Berliner Kindheit* by Jean Selz. (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 415) He reports, "The translator doesn't know a word of German. As you can imagine, the technique we use is not to be trifled with. But the results are nearly always outstanding." (*ibid.*, p. 425)

Brodersen (1996, pp. 163-164) considers these minor translations as scarcely worth mentioning, as they were mostly done either as favours to friends or as jobs to keep Benjamin's name circulating among publishers and editors. Benjamin's commentary on his own praxis is scanty and superficial, consisting mainly of personal reactions to the author and the background of the work, never to specific translational issues. He says that his Tzara translation was done "with a verve that commands respect." (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 249) Jouhandeau is "this author, to whom visions appear in the oppressive atmosphere of small French sacristies" (*ibid.*, p. 347) and who writes "studies of Catholic daily life in the French provinces ... a kind of intermingling of piety and vice that is close to Satanism." (*ibid.*, p. 360) Benjamin remarks of Bloy's work that "a more embittered critique, or better, satire, of the bourgeoisie ... could hardly have been written ... in terms of the philosophy of language, it is a well-grounded commentary on the way they talk." (*ibid.*, p. 250) These comments would be appropriate in a critical review. They are of minimal use to a translator in the field.

Apparent volume alone does not prove that Benjamin was a great translator, although a scholar like Heinrich Kaulen apparently

thinks it does. He asserts, “Benjamin himself was a significant translator. He translated Baudelaire and Proust, Balzac, Saint-John Perse, Jouhandeau and Aragon into German. The very fact that he undertook the practice of translation should disprove the suspicion that we are dealing here, compared to his work as a critic and a philosopher, with something merely peripheral.” (Kaulen, 1987, p. 8; my translation.)

In fact, a closer analysis of his best-known translations, Baudelaire, Proust and St. John Perse, will do just the opposite and confirm that suspicion. Rather than the translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux parisiens*, it is the foreword to it which is, of course, the sole basis of Benjamin’s reputation in the world of translation studies. Ironically, *The Task of the Translator* did not begin life as a foreword, but was conceived of as an afterword. Another indication that *The Task of the Translator* was largely independent of the translation of the poems is that Benjamin planned to publish it on its own in his projected journal, *Angelus Novus*. That he viewed it as a separate entity is further borne out by his mortified reaction to Stefan Zweig’s disposal of the foreword with a parenthetical comment in his “extremely bad review of my Baudelaire book.” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 245)

Benjamin had wanted to translate Baudelaire since about 1915. In 1917 he started work on *Tableaux parisiens* and other poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, using Stefan George’s bench-mark translation of 1901 as a *repoussoir*. He was motivated more by a desire to overcome the weaknesses of George’s work than to imitate its strengths. (Brodersen, 1996, p. 111) Moreover, as the years passed, he saw his translation as a tribute to what he owed Baudelaire in terms of literary and aesthetic taste (*ibid.*). His main reason for finishing it appears to have been financial. In March 1921 he attributed the urgency of completing it to the fact that he had signed a contract with Weissbach “...(including conditions that are incredibly advantageous to me) and the book is supposed to appear at the latest in October.” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 177) In fact, it was not published until 1923.

The critics took little notice of it and only two reviews are recorded. Stefan Zweig wrote the above-mentioned scathing and self-serving review (Brodersen, 1996, p. 115) in *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*. At the end of 1924 a second review, by an unknown reviewer, appeared in the Austrian *Neue freie Presse*; this was bland and excessively

partial, giving rise to the suspicion that a friend of Benjamin's had composed it. (*ibid.*, p. 117)

Benjamin's translation of Baudelaire is adequate, but no trail-blazer. As Rendall observes (1997, p. 183), the translation is neither interlinear nor literal and the syntax of the German shows little deviation from the norm.

Marilyn Gaddis-Rose, although she would like to find Benjamin's practice valuable, agrees. She says that his Baudelaire translation "is not far removed semantically from a literal plain prose English translation of the original." (1982, p. 168)

Marilyn Gaddis-Rose uses Stefan George and Benjamin's German translations of *Recueillement*, with her own English translation as a third-language control, "as a test case for Benjamin within his own practice." (*ibid.*, p. 164) She comes to the tame conclusion that George's translation is, on balance, better, but finds Benjamin's speculations on language and translation useful. (*ibid.*, p. 175) This brings us back to the fact that Benjamin's thinking is interesting, but his practice is not useful.

Brodersen's assessment is broader; he is of the opinion that "most critics today would accept that Benjamin's Baudelaire translations do not bear formal comparison with those of George", but praises Benjamin's translation for being more literal and for restoring Paris as the fulcrum of the work. (*op. cit.*, p. 111) Nevertheless, it is a resounding comment on the insignificance of the translation that it "disappeared virtually without a trace" (Jennings, 1996, p. 509) and has seldom been resurrected by scholars for analysis since.

Benjamin's own comments on the translation prove that his chief interest in translating was philosophical. He complained to Scholem that his thinking on Baudelaire was insufficiently advanced because he lacked the essential tool of "preliminary philosophical studies by authors who wrote on the topic before me." (*ibid.*)

Benjamin's lack of translational—as opposed to literary and critical—interest is revealed by his cheerful acceptance of Florens Christian Rang's criticism that he had not given enough attention to rendering meter; he himself adjudged his translation as "metrically naïve. By this, I do not mean only the verse form of the translation

itself but also that meter had not posed itself as a problem in the same sense as the literalism of the translation did. My introduction attests to this. In the meantime, I have become so clearly conscious of the problem that I am given sufficient incentive to undertake the translation anew. I am convinced that ultimately only by giving more thought to the meter would another translation of *Les Fleurs du mal* approximate Baudelaire's style more closely than mine does." (*Correspondence* 1994, pp. 229-230)

Benjamin never did take up the challenge of meter, nor did the incentive to redo the translation prove sufficient. Moreover, his lack of reference to Rosenzweig's ground-breaking achievement with regard to meter in Jehuda Halevi's poetry (published in 1923) indicates the absence of a genuine interest in the mechanics of translation. The only reference to the latter work is a request for Scholem to clarify the latter's previously declared intention to write a polemical note on "the translation of Hebrew poems." (*ibid.* p. 241)

Benjamin himself was unable to see that his translation had fallen short of his ideals. He was pleased with the dual-language edition but could not see the "contradiction between the theory of translation set forth in *The Task of the Translator* and the translation of Baudelaire it prefaces." (*TTR*, 1997, p. 183) That he remained in denial of this fact is apparent from his letter to his publisher, Weissbach, in October 1923, in which he affirmed that what would ensure the standing of his translation was that, "on the one hand, the precept of fidelity, which the translator laid down irrefutably in his Foreword, has been conscientiously followed and, on the other hand, the poetic quality has been convincingly captured." (*Gesammelte Schriften*, p. 893) He was not pleased that Weissbach printed an edition of only 500 copies, but the publisher was subsequently proved right: ten years later the initial edition had not been sold out. St.-John Perse was Benjamin's next significant translation. In May 1925 he announced to Scholem that, because of ill health, Rilke had passed on to him the task of translating "a curious work, *Anabase*, written under a pseudonym by a young French author." (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 267) As it turned out, the original work came out posthumously in 1945, apparently because the author had postponed its publication. Benjamin's translation, reviewed and revised by Herbert Steiner, first appeared five years later, in 1950.

Benjamin's motives for agreeing to do the translation were, as usual, mixed. In the same letter to Scholem he confides, "I consider the

thing to be of little importance. The translation itself is extraordinarily difficult, but it is worth doing because this short ‘prose poem’ will be very respectably remunerated.” (*ibid.*, p. 267)

Benjamin mentions a further motive in a letter to Rilke, in which he thanks the latter for having enabled him “to contribute in a small way to furthering the bond between German and French literature. Translation as the path to this goal, particularly the translation of such a recalcitrant text, is certainly one of the most difficult paths, but it is also probably much more legitimate, perhaps, than that of commentary, precisely for that reason.” (*ibid.*, p. 274-275)

Although Benjamin is, of course, right about translation bringing literatures (and, even more important to us today, cultures) closer together, he himself had already — in 1922 — chosen the path of commentary. (Scholem, 1981, p. 60) This is one of many instances where he did not match the intention to the deed. It is also possible that he was simply reflecting Rilke’s formal courtesy, since a Franco-German rapprochement does not ever seem to have been near the top of his priorities.

An interest in the nuts and bolts (such as semantics and syntax) of translational practice is, once again, absent from Benjamin’s observations about his *Anabase* translation. He speaks only about his having acquired “a clearer understanding of the atmosphere in which ... the work originated” and his attempt to “capture ... the faster pulse of this prosodic action.” (Correspondence 1994, p. 274) Proust was Benjamin’s last translation project of magnitude. The background to it is as follows. Schmiede, a Berlin publisher, had printed one volume of the first translation of Proust into German by one Rudolf Schottlaender, but it was so unsatisfactory that he asked Benjamin and Franz Hessel (editor-in-chief of Rowohlt, one of Benjamin’s publishers) to redo it and continue with it. In 1927 their translation of *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* came out and was received with generally favourable reviews. In 1928 the publisher Piper, who had acquired the rights from Schmiede, brought out *Le côté de Guermantes*. The completed manuscript of *Sodome et Gomorrhe* appears to have been lost. Hessel and Benjamin broke off part of the way into *La Prisonnière*. Benjamin had always resented doing the translation of Proust book by book, piece-meal as it were. He wrote with glee in 1931, “To my great satisfaction Piper ... has gone bankrupt. It was impossible to work with

these people and my dilatory conduct has now come out on top.” (Jenning, 1999, p. 382)

Like the *Anabase* translation, the Proust translation was not destined to reach its target audience. Like the *Baudelaire* translation, scholars then and now have made little of it.

Benjamin himself was more modest about his Proust translation than he had been about Baudelaire. In January 1926 he wrote, “You might not get far when you read my Proust translation. Some unusual things would have to happen for it to become readable... there are many reasons why I can devote very little time to it, the primary reason being how poorly I am paid.” (*ibid.*, p. 289) Three years later, in January 1929, he averred that it was “not necessarily skilful.” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 344)

The mechanics of translating Proust were secondary to Benjamin’s other motives, in this case his desire to communicate “the profound and ambiguous impressions” with which Proust filled him. (*ibid.*, p. 291) He often spoke of his wish to “collect some of my observations under the title *En traduisant Marcel Proust*. They would be in the form of aphorisms, the way in which they come into being while I work.” (*ibid.*) The closest he came to achieving this goal were some “arabesques” on Proust published in *Die Literarische Welt* in June/July 1929, which Benjamin qualified as a “very provisional but cunning essay on Proust.” (Jennings, 1999, p. 832) Incidentally, these comments are the nearest Benjamin comes to alluding to his personal translational *modus operandi* and demonstrates that his purpose in translating Proust is to clarify his perception of the author.

Furthermore, the rare comments he makes about Proust are, as usual, literary and critical, rather than translational. He notes Proust’s use of metaphor (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 286)—and we know from *The Task of the Translator* how significant metaphor in its widest sense was for him—stating that Proust “brings to the most feeble perceptions a beautiful, belligerent laconicism, in that he enlists them in the service of metaphorical expression.” (*ibid.*, p. 286) He discusses the fact that it is hard to reproduce the impact of Proustian syntax in German, where it has less effect than it does in French, but adds that there is much to compensate for this loss, such as Proust’s “total elimination of what is moral, along with the most supreme subtlety in his observation of

everything, physical and spiritual.” (*ibid.*, p. 290) He acknowledges the “intense effect” of Proust’s style on his own. (*ibid.*, p. 340)

The fact that Benjamin felt discomfort, if not repugnance, about this translation task emerges in a letter written a few months later, in September. The actual work of translating Proust “in a certain sense makes me sick. Unproductive involvement with a writer who so splendidly pursues goals that are similar to my own, at least former goals, occasionally induces something like symptoms of intestinal poisoning in me. Let me add, ... the material advantages of the enterprise are, however, worth ... mentioning. The advantages of the honorarium are debatable ... but it is very pleasant to present yourself as a Proust translator in France.” (*ibid.*, p. 305)

Benjamin’s use of his Baudelaire and Proust translations for monetary and social advancement surfaced again in his interview with Magnes, chancellor of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, when he was applying for advance funding for his hypothetical emigration to Israel. He claimed that “it was partly his work as a translator ... that had prompted philosophical and theological reflections ... that had made him ever more clearly conscious of his Jewish identity.” (Scholem, 1981, p. 38) Incidentally, it is unclear which translation could have kindled his awareness of his Jewish identity.

Benjamin’s last, tragic—and completely understandable—attempt to use translation for ulterior motives appears in the case he put forward in November 1939 to support his application to be permitted to stay in France. He cites *inter alia* his Proust translation as part of his effort to promote French culture in Germany. (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 617)

Ultimately, the ambivalence of Benjamin’s position is best captured in the affectionate, sceptical assessment of Hannah Arendt:

his erudition was great, but he was no scholar; his subject matter comprised texts and their interpretation, but he was no philologist; he was greatly attracted not by religion, but by theology and the theological type of interpretation, but he was no theologian and he was not particularly interested in the Bible; he was a born writer, but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations; he was the first German

to translate Proust (together with Franz Hessel) and St.-John Perse, and before that he had translated Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, but he was no translator ... (Arendt, 1968, p. 56)

### **Benjamin as a critic of translation**

The ideals underlying Benjamin's critiques were, as always, lofty. In his letter of July 17, 1917, to Scholem about the latter's translation of *The Song of Solomon* he asserts, "... your work will remain apologetic ... because its proper sphere does not include the expression of love and reverence for an object." He goes on to say that the "very few great translations" in existence, such as that of Pindar by Hölderlin and possibly that of Dante by Stefan George, are based on establishing the congruent spheres of two languages or on their inhabiting the same sphere. He believes that this was not possible for Scholem, because "you are not as close to German as you are to Hebrew and therefore you have not been *called (sic)* to be the translator of the Song of Solomon." (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 90)

This last sentence indicates that, even when he was young, self-growth had been a major factor in Benjamin's quasi-mystical attitude towards translation. However his comments on other people's translations are as sparse, random and generalized as they are on his own output.

It is unfortunate that Benjamin did not pay closer attention to Rosenzweig's translations when they began to appear, since they meet the conditions outlined in the above letter, a passion for both source and target language and a sense of vocation. Rosenzweig had both. His passion for Hebrew was equal to his passion for German. In September 1927 he spoke of his debt of gratitude to Buber for having made possible for him "this ongoing life in both beloved languages." (*Briefe*, 1935, p. 607) Equally undeniable was his vocation. In Leo Baeck's words, Rosenzweig "did not work for himself. For his Jewish people and above all for the Jews in Germany did he aim to work." (Baeck, 1958, p. 49)

Benjamin's criticisms of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible are sparse, albeit grandiose, generalisations. In 1938 he disarmingly acknowledged—not for the first time—that he was "unfortunately ... relatively unburdened by expert knowledge" and had taken only a

“cursory glance ... at the books of the Bible over the years.” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 551) The extent of his practical criticism is his objection to the problematical sentence structure of the translation. (*ibid.*)

In April 1926 his friend, Siegfried Kracauer, published two reviews of *Im Anfang* (Genesis) in *Die Frankfurter Zeitung*, of which he was cultural editor. Good analyses of the controversy are to be found in Askani (1997) and Jay. (1985, pp. 198 seq.) Benjamin instinctively, but not unreservedly, sided with Kracauer, both from necessity and inclination. From necessity, because he depended on Kracauer for publication in this paper. (Witte, 1991, p. 99) From inclination, because the two men were close friends and shared a similar background and outlook, including “a fundamental antipathy to the antihistorical brand of Jewish existentialism they saw at the root of the translation.” (Jay 1985, p. 213) The review, said Benjamin, “quite simply appeared to hit the mark, insofar as it is possible to judge this without a knowledge of Hebrew.” (*ibid.*, p. 303) Several months later his evaluation remained unchanged, albeit with a caveat about Kracauer’s ability to judge: “I consider myself, not to mention Kracauer, as not competent in this matter.” (*ibid.*, p. 305)

Benjamin’s assessment by and large parrots Kracauer’s. Kracauer had proclaimed that just as the religious renewal movement was specialized, one-sided and anachronistic, so the attempt to translate the Bible was specialized, one-sided, anachronistic and blind to boot. He reproached Buber and Rosenzweig for their *Unzeitgemässheit*, or not being in tune with the spirit of the times, which, in his view, had put them beyond the pale. (Askani, 1997, pp. 263 seq.)

Benjamin’s chief criticism was the inappropriate historical timing—in other words, irrelevance—of Biblical translation: “I have no idea of what might be involved, or who in the world could be legitimately concerned about, a translation of the Bible into German at this time. Now of all times—when the potential of Hebrew is being newly realised ... won’t this translation result in a dubious display of things that, once displayed will be immediately invalidated in the light of German as it now is?” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 305; cf. p. 551)

The first sentence of this quotation is indicative of Benjamin’s personal prejudice, although years later, in 1938, he cited *The Task of the Translator* as proof of his acknowledgement of “the fundamental

value of such a risk.” (*ibid.*, p. 551) The second sentence about the timing of the translation is chillingly prescient. Rosenzweig and Buber’s *Gastgeschenk*, a gift from a guest to the German population, was to be “entombed”, to use Scholem’s expression. (1976, p. 318) However, Benjamin failed to distinguish between the two entirely separate issues of the fate of the translation and its intrinsic value.

In addition, besides his dependence on Kracauer and his admitted ignorance of the Bible, two other non-translational factors may have determined Benjamin’s uninspired and often facetious reaction to the Buber-Rosenzweig translation.

First, since his student days, he had had “an uncommonly deeply rooted aversion” to Buber. (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 494) Secondly, as early as 1923, he had expressed his instinct that Jews should lie low and keep their relations with Germans secret, since “Jews endanger even the best German cause for which they stand up *publicly* (*sic*)”. (*ibid.*, p. 215) In parenthesis, it is surprising that a thinker as independent as Benjamin should have espoused such an attitude which has understandably, if regrettably, often surfaced in the history of a persecuted people.

## Conclusion

Benjamin’s personality may have had much to do with the disappointing quality of his translation practice. He appears to have been incapable by temperament of effectively actualizing his theories in any of his spheres of interest. For instance, Asja Lacis saw him as an intellectual who did not want to engage in practical political struggle. (Witte, 1991, p. 88) Benjamin himself readapted Gøethe’s words, which can be ironically re-construed as a comment on his own opus, “Everything factual is already theory.” (Jennings, 1999, p. 824)

His attitude also reflected the spirit of his times. It was held in the Frankfurt School that theory overshadowed practice and this belief would have appealed to him, since the core of his personality was philosophical and metaphysical. (Scholem, 1976, p. 177 *seq.*)

A further consideration is that by 1930 Benjamin had reached a point in his personal development at which translation was no longer important to him. It had only ever been for him one of three avenues to understanding the **philosophy**—rather than the practice—of language.

The other two avenues were quotation and critical commentary (Rendall, 1997, pp. 171 seq.), and commentary won. In January 1930, he declared that by then his ambition had become to be “considered the foremost critic of German literature.” (*Correspondence* 1994, p. 359) In any case, he had never set out to acquire legendary status as a translation theorist or a translator.

Scholarly lack of interest in Benjamin’s praxis of translation has resulted in a one-dimensional view and the need to question the legend. True, his key ideas are fascinating in and of themselves, particularly translation as a means of ensuring the survival of the original and the issue of fidelity *versus* freedom. However, “In common practice few translators see their job in these terms, the trope of *translatio*, transmission, ‘bringing over’, is still in place.” (Warren, 1989, p. 256)

In short, the conclusion is inescapable: scholars have been more interested in analyzing *The Task of the Translator* than in whether Benjamin actualized any of his concepts in his own translations. Clearly the latter do not meet the standards set in *The Task of the Translator*. None comes remotely close to making the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater “pure” language. Likewise his assessments of translations by others seldom reflect the exalted concepts in *Task of the Translator*.

The pedestal on which Benjamin has been placed is mystifying, given the pragmatic concerns of our times—concerns with the politics of translation, with “target audiences” and “receptors”. What makes it even more curious is that translation studies have been progressively acquiring status and autonomy as an independent discipline but retain as a legend a philosopher whose conception of translation was “infected with the traditional derogation of the translator’s task.” (Robinson, 1991, p. 221)

However, as Rilke said, “Genuine questions are those which seize us and which we cannot honestly evade.” The time has come for scholars to question the legend and look beyond the grand and divine words and the significant thoughts and works to the actions, at worst cramped and at best disappointing.

**University of Witwatersrand**

## References

### Works and correspondence of Walter Benjamin

(1994) *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin. 1910-1940*. Edited and annotated by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno. Translated by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.

(1972) *Gesammelte Schriften*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag.

(1961) *Illuminationen. Ausgewählte Schriften*. Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag.

(1969) *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. (translated by Harry Zohn) New York, Schocken.

(1978) *Walter Benjamin: Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*. (translated by Edmund Jephcott) (Edited and introduced by Peter Demetz.) New York, Schocken.

*Walter Benjamin, Sammlung*. Ed. J. Leinweber. No publisher or date given.

*Walter Benjamin, Selected Writings*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England. Vol. 1, (1996). Edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Vol. 2, (1999). Edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Translated by Rodney Livingstone and others. (Referred to as “Jennings” when cited.)

### Secondary Sources

ARENDDT, Hannah (1968). *Men in Dark Times*. (translated by Harry Zohn) New York, Harcourt Brace & World, Inc.

ASKANI, Hans-Christoph (1997). *Das Problem der Übersetzung — dargestellt an Franz Rosenzweig: die Methoden und Prinzipien der Rosenzweigischen und Buber-Rosenzweigischen Übersetzungen*. Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck).

BAECK, Leo (1958). *Von Moses Mendelssohn zu Franz Rosenzweig: Typen jüdischen Selbstverständnisses in den letzten beiden Jahrhunderten*. Franz-Delitsch-Vorlesungen. Stuttgart, Kohlhammer.

BERMAN, Antoine (1985). *La traduction et la lettre ou l'auberge du lointain* in *Les tours de Babel: essais sur la traduction*. Mauvezin, Trans-Europ-Repress.

BASTIN, L. (2001). "L'impact d'Antoine Berman sur la traductologie en Amérique latine: une enquête." *TTR*, vol. XIV, no. 2. pp. 181-194.

BRODERSEN, Momme (1996). *Walter Benjamin, a Biography*. Edited by Martin Dervis, translated by Malcolm R. Green and Ingrida Ligers. London and New York, Verso.

CHEYFITZ, Eric (1997, expanded edition). *The Poetics of Imperialism, Translation, Colonization from 'The Tempest' to 'Tarzan'*. Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press.

COHEN, Arthur A. and Mendes-Flohr, Paul (eds) (1987). *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought. Original Essays on Critical Concepts, Movements and Beliefs*. New York, Charles Scribner's Sons.

FISHBANE, Michael (1989). *The Garments of the Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indianapolis University Press.

GADDIS-ROSE, Marilyn (1982). "Walter Benjamin as Translation Theorist: A Reconsideration." *Dispositio*, pp. 163-175.

JACOBS, Carol (1975). "The Monstrosity of Translation." *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 90, pp. 763 seq.

JAY, Martin (1985). *Permanent Exiles. Essays on the Intellectual Migration from Germany to America*. New York, Columbia University Press.

KAHN, Lothar, assisted by Donald HOOK (1993). *Between Two Worlds: A Cultural History of German Jewish Writers*. Iowa, Iowa State University Press.

KAULEN, Heinrich (1987). *Rettung und Destruktion. Untersuchungen zu Hermeneutik Walter Benjamins*. Tübingen, Max Niemeyer Verlag.

KELLY, L.G (1979). *The True Interpreter. A History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

LAMY, Laurent (1997). “La déshérence du clandestin: les rites de l’interprétation autour de l’essai sur la traduction de Walter Benjamin.” *TTR*, vol. X, no. 2, pp. 87-150.

MAN, Paul de (1986). *The Resistance of Theory*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

MARCUS, Laura and NEAD, Lynda (1998). *The Actuality of Walter Benjamin*. London, Lawrence & Wishart.

MENDES-FLOHR, Paul (1999). *German Jews. A Dual Identity*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

— (1991). *Divided Passions. Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press.

MEYER, Michael A. (ed.) (1998/1996). *German-Jewish History in Modern Times*. Vols. 3 and 4. New York, Columbia University Press.

MOSÈS, Stéphane (1983-1984). “Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig.” *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. XV, nos. 1-2, fall-winter, pp. 188-205.

NOUSS, Alexis (1997). ). “La réception de l’essai sur la traduction dans le domaine français.” *TTR*, vol. X, no 2, pp. 71-85.

NOUSS, Alexis and LAMY, Laurent (1997). “L’abandon du traducteur: Prolégomènes de la traduction des ‘Tableaux parisiens’ de Charles Baudelaire.” *TTR*, vol. X, no 2, pp. 13-69.

RENDALL, Steven (1997). “Translation, Quotation, Iterability.” *TTR/Etudes sur le texte et ses transformations*, vol. X, no 2, 2<sup>e</sup> semestre, pp. 167-189.

ROBINSON, Douglas (1997). *What is Translation? Centrifugal Theories, Critical Interventions*. Kent, Ohio and London, Kent State University Press.

— (1991) *The Translator's Turn*. Baltimore and London, John Hopkins University Press.

ROCHLITZ, Rainer (1992). *Le désenchantement et l'art. La philosophie de Walter Benjamin*. Paris, Gallimard.

ROSENZWEIG, Franz (1935). *Briefe*. Berlin, Schocken Verlag.

SCHOLEM, Gershom (1981). *Walter Benjamin. The Story of a Friendship*. (translated by Harry Zohn). Philadelphia, Jewish Publication Society of America.

— (1976). *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis. Selected Essays*. (Edited by Werner J. Dannhauser). New York, Schocken Books.

— (1971). *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York, Schocken Books.

STEINER, George (1998 [1975]). *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

STÖRIG, Hans J. (ed.) (1963). *Das Problem des Übersetzens*. Stuttgart, Henry Goverts Verlag.

VENUTI, Lawrence (ed.) (1992). *Rethinking Translation, Discourse, Subjectivity, Ideology*. London and New York, Routledge.

WARREN, Rosanna, ed. (1989). *The Art of Translation: Voices from the Field*. Boston, Northeastern University Press.

WITTE, Berndt (1991). *Walter Benjamin. An Intellectual Biography*. (translated by James Rolleston). Detroit, Wayne State University Press.

**ABSTRACT: Divine Words, Cramped Actions: Walter Benjamin—an Unlikely Icon in Translation Studies** — For the last half century Walter Benjamin has had almost legendary status in the world of translation studies. Scholars have been fascinated by the ideas

in *The Task of the Translator*, but almost none has looked at how—or even whether—Benjamin actualized his philosophy, either in his own practice of translation or in his criticism of translations by others. This is the purpose of the present article.

**RÉSUMÉ : Mots divins, actes restreints : Walter Benjamin — une figure icônique paradoxale en traductologie** — Depuis un demi-siècle maintenant, la réputation de Walter Benjamin est légendaire dans le domaine de la traductologie. Les penseurs ont été fascinés par les concepts énoncés dans *La Tâche du Traducteur*, mais presque personne n'a regardé de plus près comment — ou même si — Benjamin a actualisé sa propre théorie, soit dans ses propres traductions, soit dans ses critiques des traductions d'autrui. Voilà l'objet de cet article.

**Key words:** Benjamin, thought, grand, practice, disappointing.

**Mots-clés :** Benjamin, pensée, grandiose, pratique, décevante.

**Janet Sanders: 5788 Hudson, Montréal, Québec, H4W 2K6.  
E-mail: janet.sanders@sympatico.com**