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The Inside Passage:
Translation as Method and Relation
In Serres and Benjamin

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Abstract

The central premise of this thesis is that translation has acquired a new meaning in so-called postcolonial times and that this transformation calls forth a renewal of the philosophical conceptualisation of translation. I begin by distinguising between two different philosophical genealogies of translation in modern European philosophy. The first is a Romantic and hermeneutic lineage, in which translation is closely bound to the movement of culture (*Bildung*), and conceived of as an 'experience of the foreign'. The second is a *relational* genealogy of translation, in which translation is a transformation without teleology, yet systematically-oriented. The thesis reconstructs this alternative concept through a parallel reading of Walter Benjamin's and Michel Serres' works on translation, contending that Leibniz's relational metaphysics proved a crucial resource for both of them. Albeit reflecting on different objects (the sciences and the work of art), these two authors converge in thinking translation as a *relation* and a *method*, associating translation with their critique of epistemology. By drawing on a generalised metaphysics of language, they both reflect on translation as a *transformation* in the objective domain, hence as a form of *historicity*. The thesis is composed of three autonomous yet convergent parts. The first part operates as a backdrop to the whole by expounding the need for locating the philosophy of translation outside of the ethics of alterity. It contends that the link made between linguistic difference and difference 'as such' is often insufficiently mediated. The second part examines Serres' early works, explicating his philosophy of translation in close connexion with the evolution of his structuralism, from his doctoral work on Leibniz (1968) to the last of the *Hermès* series*: Le passage du Nord-Ouest* (1980). The third part investigates Benjamin's philosophy of translation in light of his metaphysics of language, following his concepts of the 'afterlife' as a thread through his early and later works. Finally, the conclusion propounds the intrinsic connexion that holds between the translation problem, Leibnizianism and 'decentered epistemologies'.

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‘His profundity is to be found […] in the way he follows where the argument leads, without regard to any preconceived goal. He may be said to externalize himself, to surrender to the demands of the matter in hand and to think against his own inclinations.’

- Adorno, *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*

Contents

Introduction

Over the past three decades, postcolonial criticism and the problem of globalization have had a lasting impact upon the humanities and the social science, not only by opening up new fields of inquiry but by engaging a general transformation of methods. By attempting to move beyond the nation-state as a historical and scientific unit, they have put a greater emphasis on forms of passages and transfers, on ambiguous territorial entities (frontiers, oceans), on the phenomena of cultural hybridization (diaspora, migrations, creolization, transculturation), whilst also bringing forth various strands of transdisciplinarity. Given this context, the concept of translation has become a crucial theoretical operator not only in comparative literature, history and social theory but also in the emerging field of 'translation studies', and, of course, philosophy. An effect of both 'real' and 'theoretical' globalization, the translational paradigm has the capacity to configure anew a number of issues traditionally attached to 'cultural difference', such as the universalism-particularism dichotomy, comparability or the question of 'eurochronology'.[1] How should we rethink the philosophical problem of translation in light of this new conjuncture?

In the first place, I argue that we need to shift the grounds of the traditional debate within translation theory. The debate over translation has long been structured by the enduring opposition between two opposed camps or irreconciliable models. The first is grounded in the paradigm of *communication*, of its means and its norms. Its ideal is the transfer of a univocal meaning, the seeking of the most exact relation between a source-text and a target-text; it is centred around the notion of equivalence. In opposition, the second model inquires into translation as a relational, cultural, or aesthetic experience. It is oriented by aesthetic, ethical, or sometimes political considerations and gravitates

[1] See, for instance: Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013); Etienne Balibar, 'Sub Specie Universitatis,' *Topoi* 25, no. 1–2 (2006), pp. 3-16; Boris Buden et al. 'Cultural Translation: An Introduction to the Problem, and Responses' in *Translation Studies* 2 (2009), pp. 196–219; Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2009); Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Peter Osborne, 'Modernism as Translation' in Philosophy in Cultural Theory (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 53-62; Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

around questions of difference and untranslatability. Behind these two models there are two widely distinct conceptions of language: a linguistic and informational conception on the one hand, and a hermeneutical one on the other. Rather than arguing for either of these positions, I propose that we shift our attention elsewhere; that we displace the focus of the problem. I will show that these positions can be relativized by problematizing translation, not only from the exclusive perspective of language, but also from the standpoint of history. I thereby shift the debate away from the opposition between translatability and untranslatability, communicability and incommensurability, towards a reflection on translation as *transformation*. This entails the displacement of focus away from the *conditions* involved in the realization of translation, be they cognitive or practical, to the *effects* and broader signification of this operation.

In the second place, I contend that the 'canonical' genealogy of translation in modern European philosophy is unsuited for this task. In the tradition originating in German Romanticism, translation is interpreted as an operation *on* and *of* culture (*Bildung*), both at the individual and collective levels. In the writings of Herder, Humboldt or Novalis, translation is simultaneously a literary and a cultural experience.[2] An encounter between the 'proper' and the 'foreign', it engages a formative and transformative process at the double level of language and culture. Celebrated as the earliest positive account of the necessity and productivity of linguistic and cultural difference in European thought, this model has persisted until the present through hermeneutics, literary thought, and, to a certain extent, ethnographic theory. This historical persistence, I contend, is problematic in two ways: firstly, because it cannot simply do away with its historical and conceptual connexion to the question of nationality and nationalism. Secondly, because it remains implicitly modelled upon a teleological historicity of return.

What the present thesis proposes, then, is to articulate an alternative genealogy of the concept of translation through an analysis of the philosophies of translation developed by Michel Serres on the one hand and Walter Benjamin on the other. Each, in his own

[2] See: Clara Auvray-Assayas et al, 'To Translate' in Barbara Cassin and alii, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 1150 ; Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. by S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

way, has addressed translation from the standpoint of *form* rather than the subject, the nation or the *Bildung* process. They both attributed a fundamental importance to translation as a historical articulation and historical method. In their accounts, translation is both relation and process, a form of relationality and a form of historicity. Translation theory thus leaves the restricted domain of intersubjective communication and literature to become a relational paradigm, a form of mediation, and a principle of historical intelligibility. Albeit extremely different and even opposed in certain respects, their two approaches converge in relying on a linguistico-metaphysical paradigm of language derived from Leibniz. As their shared point of reference, Leibniz's metaphysics of expression will prove to be pivotal to my argument as a whole.

The argument unfolded in this thesis rests on the hypothesis that the philosophical problem of translation divides itself into two fundamental levels of analysis: *language* and *form*.[3] On this distinction rests the possibility of articulating an *extended* concept of translation that neither dissolves into the indefinite realm of 'culture', nor simply falls back onto the perennial conflict inherent in the definition of language. Moroever, this characterization of the problem allows us to highlight the fundamental disunity or internal divisions of the concept of translation, which manifest itself in the thesis' structure. Indeed, the tripartite construction of the thesis reflects the internal disjunctions of the translation concept, both at the level of *form* and at the level of *language*. On the one hand, each part investigates translation starting from a different 'formal' problematic. The formal issue in the first part is that of *philosophy* itself, hence the question of universality or theoretical generality. How does translation participate in the production of theoretical generalities and the universality of philosophical discourse? The second part, which is dedicated to Serres, concentrates on mathematical and more broadly *scientific forms*. How, asks Serres, do we import scientific models from one discipline to another? What happens when we consider translation from the standpoint of the materiality of information? The third and last part of the thesis, which is dedicated to Benjamin, addresses the problem of form through the prism of art and the *artwork*. How does translation encapsulate the historical becoming of an artwork across different generations? Taken together, the three parts show that if translation establishes a determinate *relation between forms*, it is also an *immanent historical*

[3] See diagramme, Table 1, p. 242. This diagramme sketches out the problematic of this thesis in the form of a mind map.

method.[4] On the other hand, the structure of the thesis stages the internal split of the concept of translation at the level of language. Whereas Serres' theory of translation emerges from the philosophy of communication, reducing language to code and information, Benjamin strongly argues against the communication paradigm. Their opposition is relative insofar as they both concur in arguing that translation is a fundamental form of historicity, but absolute, since these forms of transformation are articulated via entirely different concepts of history.

This thesis is therefore *eccentric* in the etymological sense: it is constructed from three separate, 'monadic' problematics. Unlike in other philosophical works about translation, the practice of (professional) translators is neither the ultimate object, nor the normative centre of the present study. In each part of this thesis, translation constitutes not so much the common point of departure as the common response, or shared point of flight, to problems arising within different philosophical moments. To the extent that it concerns the translational aporias and 'resolutions' of cultural difference, the first part offers a critical background to the whole problematic, first in relation to Romanticism, and then under the angle of deconstruction. The second part situates translation in 'the 1960s moment in French philosophy'[5] at the point of juncture between structuralism on one side, and the epistemology of science on the other. The third part looks at translation as an interface between art criticism and history, between Benjamin's post-romantic theory of art and his materialism.

The first chapter offers a historical problematization to the problem of translation as *relation*. In Romanticism, translation emerged as a *philosophical* problem insofar as it articulates questions of language and literature in relation to the problem of nation-formation, or *Bildung* philosophy. The chapter critically engages with this genealogy, itself 'restaged', in the post-war moment, as an 'ethics of translation'. I argue that the emergence of '(cultural) difference' as a matter of political and philosophical concern needs to be understood against the backdrop of the repression of 'race' in the

[4] 'Method,' it is important to note, needs to be grasped *problematically* and is *not* synonymous with 'methodology.' Likewise, the adjective 'methodic', which will frequently be used throughout this thesis, is not to be confounded with 'methodological'. In opposition to 'methodological', 'methodic' does not refer to a particular area of knowledge or discipline, but more neutrally and minimally, to a 'path' or 'operation' of knowledge.

[5] On this expression, see Patrice Maniglier, *Le moment philosophique des années 1960 en France* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2011)

immediate aftermath of World War II. What becomes apparent from this analysis is the need for an alternative philosophical approach to translation, one that would take into account the anti-colonial critique of anthropology and historicism, rather than flatly extending or globalizing what cannot but remain a quintessentially *intra*-European ethics of translation. The Romantic genealogy of translation is then contrasted with the reflections on cultural encounters and racial violence developed by Frantz Fanon. Fanon's thought, which also belongs to the post-war moment, represents a critical response to the former from the perspective of decolonisation. In order to think the radical mutation of colonial society together with its modernization, Fanon dissociates nationalism from linguistic essentialism, initiating a certain translational practice towards Europe and its 'languages'.

The second chapter provides a more immediate contextual problematization for the present inquiry, by examining how the concept of translation has emerged as a meta-theoretical operator, both in philosophy and throughout the humanities. Setting off from Jacques Derrida's reflection on *the translation of philosophical language*, the chapter traces the ways in which the latter has been 'activated' within and outside philosophy (thus proving to be an access point to broader historico-cultural and geopolitical problematics). I start by addressing Derrida's problematization of the relationships between philosophical translation, nationalism and decolonisation. I then analyse the continuities and discontinuities from Derrida to Spivak's so-called 'politics of translation.' In Spivak's works, the operations of translation and the question of 'idiomaticity' offer an avenue for the rethinking of the politics of knowledge and education in the context of globalisation. I next turn to the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (2004; 2013), which uses the notion of the 'untranslatable' as a methodic framework for the history of philosophy. I show that, while it succeeds in showing how philosophical terminology is at once fastened to history and language, the *Dictionary* remains unconvincingly theorized as a whole, and especially in relation to the political issues it allegedly touches upon. The last section of this chapter addresses the mechanisms sustaining the transdisciplinary proliferation of the concept of translation. I argue that this 'inflation' is the sign of a collective scholarly movement towards a post-national epistemology of cultural processes and that instead of trying to regulate it, we need to consider it as an integral part of the theory of translation.

The third chapter expounds what can be termed as Serres' 'Leibnizian Structuralism'. Apart from an introductory excursus on Serres' conception of structure and form, the chapter is entirely focused on Serres' doctoral thesis, *The System of Leibniz and its Mathematical Models* (1968). In this study, Serres contends that Leibniz's main mathematical models constitute a basic formal vocabulary from which we can reconstruct the systematic character of his philosophical thought. Beyond deductive connexions, this systematicity fundamentally relies on the translation of models, forms and images across the 'regions' of his 'Encyclopedia'. I show that Serres relies on the concept of translation in order to refashion Leibniz's system of expression as a structural totality, in which translational relations replicate, at the level of method, the *expressive* relations of intercommunication holding between Monads. What emerges from this analysis is that translation did not only play logical and architectonic functions within Serres' reconstruction of Leibniz's system, but also acted as a theoretical pivot between Classical metaphysics and structuralism. Finally, I contend that by reframing the *Monadology* as a translational whole, Serres developed a seminal model of systematicity without fixed metalanguage, a pattern of decentered theoretical generalisation or a *monadological universality*.

The fourth chapter elucidates some of the broader theoretical underpinnings of Serres' early philosophy by reading it in light of the French epistemological tradition and cybernetics. It focuses on the successive reconfigurations of Serres' philosophy of translation in the course of the writing of the *Hermès* volumes.[6] Shifting from Leibnizian systematicity to the history of sciences and the theory of information, translation became a fundamental model of historical *transformation* in both immaterial and material domains. The chapter sets off from the critique of epistemology developed by Serres after Bachelard and Cavaillès. I argue that the specificity of translation as a form of historicity is that it constitutes an autonomous method of knowledge: in translation the epistemology and the history of science converge. The chapter then moves to *Hermès III*, *La Traduction*, which opened up a new phase in Serres' philosophy of translation by associating it directly with the physics of information. As a fundamental technology of the conduction of information, Serres

[6] They include : *La Communication* (1968), *L'Interférence* (1972), *La Traduction* (1974), *La Distribution* (1977) and *Le Passage du Nord-Ouest* (1980).

ascribed a singular material significance to translation. I argue however, that by naturalizing translation into the materiality of information, Serres has also detached it from its social, historical and interpretive dimensions. To a certain extent, Benjamin's philosophy of translation enables us to go past this limitation.

The fifth chapter analyses Benjamin's early philosophy of translation from the angle of what can be termed his 'metaphysics of expression'. From this perspective 'The Task of the Translator' (1923) is read alongside Benjamin's other early texts on language, art criticism and epistemology. The aim of this exegesis is to call attention to the relational paradigm that sustained Benjamin's early works as a counterpart to his theologically informed critique of the Kantian theory of knowledge. The chapter thematizes translation through the relational problematics Benjamin traverses in the preface on translation. Among these, Benjamin's conception of the relationship between the original and its translation, characterized as a 'connexion of life' (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*), is cardinal insofar as it articulates systematicity and transformation together. A large part of my analysis hinges upon the concept of 'medium' in Benjamin's early thought and in particular in his doctoral dissertation (1919). I argue that this concept crystallizes his singular extension of the philosophy of language into a form of relationality and a form of expression, designating at once a sphere of relations in the objective domain and a *method*. I further suggest that the concept of 'pure language' also needs to be grasped through this prism: 'pure language' is not an originary language but is obtained through a harmonic, relational totalization of idioms. The chapter ends with a tentative analysis of Benjamin's conception of 'intensive language' as 'internal relation', a central notion in Benjamin's early metaphysics of expression.

The final chapter analyses the joint transformation of Benjamin's theory of translation and of his metaphysics of expression *after* his encounter with the *Monadology*. The first part of the chapter examines the status of monadological metaphysics in the *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* (1928) from the double angle of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' and of the study of baroque allegory. This analysis reveals that the 'idea' and the 'allegory' represent two opposite forms of expression and two ways of historicizing the monad. It shows that Benjamin's habilitation thesis marks the transposition of his previous metaphysics of language into a method. The second part of the chapter charts

Benjamin's successive recastings of the concept of 'afterlife' through his 1930s works on literary criticism and history. I maintain that the afterlife needs to be grasped as an expressive form and as a form of historical individuation. What can be tentatively termed Benjamin's 'translational history', I finally suggest, is a history that builds upon the process of interpretation as the fundamental form of the historical process. It designates a historical ontology, whereby the passage between different languages is considered to be a primary form of transformation.

PART 1

CHAPTER I

Translation as Relation: Undoing a Post-War Conjuncture

> The verbal text is jealous of its linguistic signature but impatient of national identity. Translation flourishes by virtue of this paradox.[1]

It is one of the aporia of the '*philosophical*' itself to be a discourse from the West, a discourse, the scope of which is nonetheless supposed to transcend its 'own' language to universalize or generalise itself. In this movement, the idea of Europe plays an ambiguous role. A multi-national, multi-linguistic entity, Europe has long constituted the *paradigmatic* case study for the conceptualisation of philosophical translation and cultural exchanges. At the same time, the symmetrical ideal of intra-European relations is also the backdrop *against which* the asymmetrical relationships of Europe to the 'rest' of the world have been conceived. Europe is at once the source of comparativism and itself incomparable. This peculiar logic of globality, the dynamic core of the 'anthropological' paradigm, although theoretically overturned after World War Two, continues to structure, through academic institutions, the practical production of knowledge. As Naoki Sakai argues, the latter remains traversed by a fundamental asymmetry between the 'centripetal flow' of factual data 'from peripheral sites to various metropolitan centers' on the one hand, and the flow of 'theory' (classification, evaluation, frames of intelligibility), from the metropoles to the peripheries on the other. The production of knowledge, as Sakai writes, 'has largely occurred according to a historically specific division of intellectual labor in which 'theory' is associated with "the West".'[2]

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[1] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge (Mass.) & London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 251.

[2] Naoki Sakai, 'Theory and the West: On the Question of Humanitas and Anthropos', in *Revue Transeuropéenne [online]* (2011), http://www.transeuropeennes.eu/fr/articles/voir_pdf/316.

The increasing importance that has been ascribed to the study of translation, both as practical reality and as a theoretical concept, can be considered as an epiphenomenon of the more general movement just described: a way of reflecting upon, trying to undo and, perhaps, *exorcise*, this peculiar logic of globality. Along with the gradual institutionalization of 'translation studies,' a more diffuse inflation of the sign 'translation' has recently taken place throughout the humanities and the social sciences. This inflation is symptomatic of a growing interest in the geopolitical stakes of the production of knowledge as well as in its nationalist and imperialistic underpinnings. At the same time, it manifests the need for a renewal of approaches to 'cultural encounters' and 'historical difference' after the critique of the Enlightenment alliance between anthropology and the philosophy of history. The wager of this thesis is to argue that this dissemination of the notion of translation across various critical discourses is not incidental. To the contrary, it compels us to reconfigure the philosophical concept of translation in new directions, starting from its most recent historical and political crystallizations. The difficulty of this exercise lies in our attempt to avoid restricting the scope of this conceptual inquiry to its linguistic or practical core, but rather composing it from an apparently (disciplinary, historically) disparate domain.

Since the 1980s, the idea of translation has been instrumental in various projects concerned with the decolonisation of epistemology, the deconstruction of philosophy and the globalization of theory, all of them being associated, directly or indirectly, with a critical reflection on the history of Western hegemony. The specificity of a 'translational' critical apparatus is that it inscribes its problematic in the *longue durée*, in a historicity which is not immediately or strategically political, but linguistic and cultural. Locating itself directly at the philosophical level, or rather within the contested space of the 'critique of philosophy', a 'translational critique' is also involved in another temporality, that of languages themselves, in their historical, political, and anthropological determinations. This is why these different attempts, and this thesis as a whole, develop the idea of translation as *method*. The concept of method both refers to punctual 'strategies' and to meta-philosophical reflections, thus to the different 'scales' at which the operation of translation can be attended to or analysed from a

philosophical angle.[3] Problems of translation are always located slightly below, or slightly above, the philosophical 'threshold'. In opposition to literary approaches to translation, philosophy tends to tackle translation in relation to 'philosophical languages' at the expense of natural languages – at the level of philosophical linguistic *constructs*. This can be generalised: both in its 'continental' and 'analytic' strands, philosophy tends to reconstruct languages *before* theorizing translation, maintaining (historical or 'natural') linguistic diversity in a zone of productive unthought or metaphorical reserve.

Concepts of Translation

Philosophical debates around translation tend to be overdetermined by a divide between two antagonistic positions. These two 'camps' can be described, broadly speaking, as an *instrumental* conception of translation, and a *hermeneutic* position. Whereas 'instrumental' theories are focused on the communicational function of language, 'hermeneutic' approaches are generally based on notions of cultural or aesthetic experience. As early as 1963, the French linguist Georges Mounin had already described this polarity. He divided the field of translation theory into a 'positive' interpretation of translation on the one hand, which focuses on the functioning of (successful) communication and a 'negative' interpretation on the other, which rather emphasizes what, in language, fails to be communicated, or what remains untranslatable. To the 'excess' of the 'naïve pretentions' of past conceptions of language which, from Cicero, Jerome or Du Bellay, had relied on the unity of human experience, of the mind and of its forms of knowledge, modern literary figures such as Rilke or Blanchot had, Mounin argued, reacted by an 'inverse excess' in revering 'linguistic solipsism.'[4] Whilst the first camp seeks its model of exactitude in the sciences of communication and the study of cognition, the second often posits its own legitimacy through its *opposition to the first*. Inquiring into translation beyond the 'merely linguistic', seeking to articulate a concept of translation that 'does not abide to the logic

[3] For an example of the problematization of translation at the micrological level, see the 'untranslatable', analysed in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* (see *supra*, p.70), where a change in any aspect of the domain of reference (or semantic unit) of a concept leaves a mark on its history, and, for the macrological level, see the global 'logic' I have referred to in the opening paragraphs of this chapter.

[4] Georges Mounin, *Les Problèmes théoriques de la traduction* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 171-3.

of equivalence,'[5] the latter implicitly calls for a more encompassing conception of language, one that includes its aesthetic, social and political facets. However, while this dichotomy has an obvious heuristic importance, caution should be taken when navigating these positions. There is a potential danger that we fix all the philosophical and political stakes of the translation question upon this very dichotomy. Whilst models of language are crucial, it is my contention that they neither suffice to articulate the problem of translation in its specificity, nor to establish the coordinates of a politics of translation.

When we consider the history and etymology of the concept of 'translation', the communicational paradigm of 'translation proper' proves to be a relatively recent theoretical invention. Numerous studies have pointed to the difficulty of tracing the origin of this notion in ancient texts. In Greek language, metaphor (*metaphorein*), interpretation (*hermeneuien*) and reformulation (*metaphrazein*) are all signifiers that 'brush against' the idea of translation without meaning it.[6] In Latin, *transferre* and *translatare* remain indistinguishable from metaphor whereas *interpres* points indifferenly either to the translator or the exegete.[7] In medieval thought, *translatio* continued to cover a large spectrum of significations related to the semantics of transfer: from the physical displacement or transport of people or things, through the transfer of jurisdiction to the transfer of ideas.[8] Until the Renaissance, translation was therefore part of a non-delineated conceptual field, invariably meaning 'more or something else than the passage from one language to another.'[9] As the authors of the entry 'translation' of the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* observe, '[i]f translation does not constitute a problem all unto itself, this is because the difference between languages is not taken into consideration as such. Instead, the place of translation is more of a gap or void' (*place en creux*).[10] Yet the 'void' that modern translation theory has come to 'occupy' should not be read as a mere etymological absence, but can be more pointedly

[5] Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, Or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 289.
[6] Clara Auvray-Assayas et al., 'Traduire', *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies : Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Paris: Seuil, 2004), p. 1306.
[7] Antoine Berman, 'De la translation à la traduction', *TTR, traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 1, no. 1 (1988), p. 28.
[8] Ibid., p. 29.
[9] Clara Auvray-Assayas et al., 'To Translate ', *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 1139.
[10] Auvray-Assayas et al., 'To Translate ', p. 1140; Auvray-Assayas et al., 'Traduire', pp. 1306-7.

understood in relation to philosophy's relative disinterest in 'difference' in the ethical and political sense ascribed to it in the post-war era. Although anthropology and comparative grammars, two emanations of the eighteenth century, were assuredly concerned with 'differences', these disciplines did not inquire into these 'differences' as 'relations' or as 'encounters',[11] but as possibilities of *comparisons*, for taxonomic, classificatory, hierarchical purposes. As such, 'anthropological differences'[12] were above all objects of cognition destined to both political and intellectual containment. There could be no relation between the two ends of the 'empirico-transcendental doublet' formed by the world-historic figures of 'humanitas' and 'anthropos',[13] for the latter's language was already subsumed (and subdued) under the language of European reason. As this racial paradigm solidified into the institutional forms of modern science, the appropriately named 'humanities' [sic] increasingly approached literary, cultural and linguistic variety as a repository of enlightening differences in a civilized, Westphalian Europe, promoting intellectual development through travel (in its Grand Tour variations), and a 'world republic of letters' through the circulation of printed literature. It should therefore be considered no coincidence that, in the past thirty years, the so-called 'translational turn' has mostly affected the fields that were built on comparison: comparative literature, anthropology, history.

The present chapter will take a closer look at the post-war paradigm of an 'ethics of translation', which, following Antoine Berman, can be rearticulated as a reflection on the 'trial' or 'experience' of the 'foreign', redoubling German Romanticism into the post-war moment, associating the birth of the international with the re-emergence of cosmopolitan nationalism. It argues that the emergence of '(cultural) difference' as a matter of political and philosophical concern in French philosophy and international cultural institutions needs to be understood against the backdrop of the political and anthropological repression of 'race' in the immediate aftermath of World War Two. This will then be contrasted to Frantz Fanon's insights on cultural encounters and racial violence developed in the same decade. Fanon's thought constitutes both a

[11] On the relevance of the concept of 'cultural encounters' for history, see: Joan Pau Rubies, *Travelers and Cosmographers: Studies in the history of Early Modern Travel and Ethnology* (London: Ashgate, 2007).

[12] On the concept of 'anthropological difference', see Etienne Balibar, 'Universalité bourgeoise et différences anthropologiques', in *Citoyen sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique* (Presses universitaires de France, 2011), pp. 465-515.

[13] See: Naoki Sakai, 'Theory and the West'.

response to the former and an entirely unprecedented reflection on the relationships between culture and human emancipation. Whilst the question of language was crucial to Fanon's thinking through culture and cultural alienation, he dissociated nationalism from linguistic essentialism, thus foregrounding a certain deconstructive practice towards Europe and its 'languages'.

1. A Romantic Genealogy of Translation: Translation and *Bildung*

Race, Culture and the Post-War Paradigm

The reframing of cultural globalization through translation is not a new phenomenon, but can be traced back to the idea of international civil society emerging in the aftermath of World War Two and institutionally validated (and conserved) through international organisations. War and post-war diplomacy accelerated the professionalisation of translation and transformed its stakes under the heading of international peace and commerce. This bestowed an ethical dimension upon translation that it did not previously have.[14] From 1947 onwards, UNESCO launched an international programme of 'Translation of the Classics' with the explicit aim of 'fostering of mutual understanding and peace between nations' through the creation of a 'community of culture to which the people of all countries would be able to participate.'[15] From its inception the appointed team of academics, writers and translators was confronted with the puzzling, if not insurmountable, task of defining a 'world classic'. A 'classic', they believed, needed to be at once 'a representative work', and a work of 'universal significance'; it had to represent the world's cultural expressions *in its diversity*, and yet *contribute* to human civilization. As the Director of the UNESCO explained in 1949, 'every culture can only become itself through measuring, in itself and all the others, the part of the most irreducibly singular, and that

[14] On the relationships between the professionalization of interpretation and the development of the United-Nations, see Jesus Baigorri-Jalon, *Interpreters at the United Nations: A History* (Salamanca: Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca, 2004).

[15] Bureau pour la traduction des classiques, 15 November 1949, PHS, Conf 5/2, Paris, UNESCO Archives (Paris), pp.1-2.

of the universality of human values.'[16] As a strategy of reconciliation, translation would cultivate international exchanges and undo conflictuality through intercultural reciprocity: textual translations were to a world civilization what economic exchanges were to international peace. The discussions taking place at the UNESCO at the time reflect the simultaneous influence of two different concepts of culture: a progressive-spiritual notion of culture stemming from German nineteenth-century thought, and an incipient version of culture promoted by the new French ethnography developed in these years by Lévi-Strauss and Michel Leiris, notably inspired by Boas's critique of evolutionism. At their convergence, translation embodies the utopia of a world civilization at the global scale, or in Léopold Sedar Senghor's words, a 'give-and-take encounter' (*rendez-vous du donner et du recevoir*).

Meanwhile, Claude Lévi-Strauss was, for his part, involved in another, better known project at the UNESCO, around the 'Statement on Race', which lasted from 1949 to 1967. His team of 'experts' including anthropologists, biologists and psychologists, had the task of producing the text that would officially dispel, through scientific evidence, the concept of race. It was meant to be a scientific refutation of the biological idea of human races and had the official doctrine of former Nazi Germany as principal target. However, the validity of first 'Statement on Race' (1950) was immediately contested by a number of vocal (mostly British) physical anthropologists and was thus reissued in an amended version in 1951.[17] As Etienne Balibar has argued, it is in the wake of these Statements that the category of racism first emerged as an *interdiction*, and even as a

[16] Jaime Torres Bodet, 'Allocution de Jaime Torres Bodet, directeur général de l'UNESCO lors de la réunion du comité d'experts sur la traduction des classiques', 21 November 1949, File Translation of the Classics meetings of experts, 803 A 064 "56", UNESCO Archives (Paris).

[17] *Le Racisme devant la science* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). Not only was the *Statement* immediately called into question by a number of anthropologists (notably coming from the London Royal Anthropological Institute), and therefore reformulated in an updated version in 1951, which reverted to keeping the word' race' in order to 'express the notion of biologically characterized group', but the very anthropological science of race continued to be exerted in Germany until long after 1945. (See: Robert Proctor, 'From Anthropologie to Rassenkunde in the German Anthropological Tradition' In George W. Stocking, *Bones, Bodies And Behavior: Essays in Behavioral Anthropology* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 138-179.) Various letters addressed to the director of the project, Alfred Métraux, reflecting the climate in which the physical anthropologists of the time received the *Statement*. A 1950 letter by Henri Victor Vallois for example raised the following question: 'To wrest from racism even the word through which it was formed, the manifesto proposes to replace the term "race" by that of "ethnic group". Does one believe that suppressing the word will suppress the thing? And are we trying to resuscitate the old medieval quarrel between nominalists and realists?' Folder Statement on Race Part I., 323.12 A 102, UNESCO Archives (Paris).

categorical imperative.[18] Whilst staged as an epistemological overturn at the level of science, however, these statements constituted not so much a revolution in the scientific veracity of 'race' as the moral foundation of human rights. It was orchestrated as a turning of anthropology against itself, the overcoming of physical anthropology by ethnology, and the revenge of humanities against the hard sciences. The idea of cultural dialogue expressed through the *Translation* project appears as the means by which the ideology of race could be creatively overcome, that is, at once *repressed* and *domesticated* in the higher spheres of literature, spirituality and philosophy. Taken together, they illustrate the substitution of 'diversities' in process: at the same time as racial differentiation was losing its transcendental legitimacy and its structuring character, cultural 'differences' were given a 'quasi-transcendental' status.[19] This did not only take place in anthropology but across the full spectrum of the humanities, thus grounding what would be later called 'methodological nationalism'. The downfall of the 'myth of race' did not only yield, in a subterranean fashion, to a new 'racism without races', or 'cultural racism', but also to the emergence of the myth of *cultural dialogue*. This post-war institutional 'sublimation' is, I surmise, an integral part of the philosophical-historical problem of translation posed in the second half of the Twentieth century, remaining the paradoxical theoretical bedrock upon which early-days anti-racist and anti-colonial movements premised their political struggles.[20]

Whilst Lévi-Strauss produced an 'ontology' for cultural decolonisation by aligning all 'cultures' on a single plane of significance,[21] such a principle could not avoid being fundamentally ambiguous when converted into the idiom of 'nation-state' formation and the 'right of people to self-determination'. The unity of the 'people', cultural homogenisation and linguistic unification constituted a system of overlapping priorities

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[18] Etienne Balibar, 'La construction du racisme', *Actuel Marx* 38 (2005), pp. 12 & 19.

[19] Etienne Balibar, 'Universalité bourgeoise et différences anthropologiques', in *Citoyen sujet et autres essais d'anthropologie philosophique* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France-PUF, 2011), p. 486.

[20] To name a few emblematic figures of this first generation of anti-racist and anti-colonial thinkers accross three continents: Rabindatrah Tagore, Alan Locke, and Léopold Sédar Senghor. The idea of 'cultural dialogue' had a central importance for these three intellectuals.

[21] 'Structural anthropology provided an ontology for decolonization by maintaining multiple cultures on a single plane of significance. The postcolonial condition requires an anthropology of a more radically transcultural kind: a transnational and translational study of the cultural, focused on the production of new kinds of social subjects, whose actions are distributed across time and space more widely and with greater complexity than ever before.' Peter Osborne *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2013), pp. 163-4.

in the struggle for nation-states and the striving for international recognition. A new 'international' order was supposed to take reality through cultural and literary exchanges while national and cultural 'differences' remained determined through previous regimes of comparison, classification and civilizational progress. As a result, the historical sequence opened up by World War Two and the era of decolonisation is riddled with the contradictions produced by the encounter between practices of anticolonial (and postcolonial) politics and a philosophy of emancipation emerging from European nation-state formation. From this vantage point it becomes possible to grasp the newly internationalized problem of 'translation' as a repetition and displacement, into another theatre, of the German Classical and Romantic interest in translation of the turn of the nineteenth century.

The Experience of the Foreign

> Apart from the Romans, we are the only nation to have felt the impulse (*Trieb*) of translation so irresistibly and to owe it so infinitely in culture (*Bildung*). Hence the many similarities between our culture (*Kultur*) and the late Roman literary culture. This impulse is an indication of the very elevated and original character of the German people. Germanity is a cosmopolitanism mixed with the most vigorous individualism. Only for us have translations become expansions. It requires poetic morality and the sacrifice of one's personal proclivities to undertake a true translation. One translates out of a love for the beautiful and for the literature of one's home country. Translation is as much poetry (*dichten*) as the creation of one's own works – and more difficult, more rare. In the final analysis, all poetry is translation. I am convinced that the German Shakespeare today is better than the English.[22]

Antoine Berman's seminal 1984 book, *L'épreuve de l'étranger: Culture et traduction dans l'Allemagne romantique*, translated under the title *The Experience of the Foreign* in 1992, is fundamental to any critical genealogy of European philosophies of translation. The study shows that the burgeoning interest in translation in Romantic Germany is a

[22] Novalis, quoted in Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany*, trans. by S. Heyvaert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 105.

decisive *moment,* not only in the history and the theory of translation but also in connexion to the philosophical and political emergence of the *nation-form* via the crucial mediation of the concept of *Bildung*. As Berman argues, the early Romantics' reflections on translation were 'structurally inscribed in the Bildung,'[23] the latter being German culture's principal mode of self-intelligibility since Herder and Goethe. This structural inscription in *Deutschheit* meant a particular emphasis on foreignness (*Fremdheit*) as a philosophical, literary, and poetic problem. As Berman observes, the notion of *Bildung* is fundamentally characterized by its movement. *Bildung*, he writes, 'is at the same time a process and its result. Through *Bildung*, an individual, a people, a nation, but also a language, a literature, a work of art in general form themselves and thereby acquire a form, a *Bild*.'[24] This process is at once enlarging (*Erweiterung*), or movement towards universality, and voyage (*Reise*) or migration (*Wanderung*).[25] At its core, as we know from Hegel, *Bildung* designates an experience with alterity or an experience of non-self (*épreuve du non-soi*).[26] 'As the experience (*épreuve*) of alterity, the formation of self through the experience of alterity, experience must finally emerge as reunion, identity, unity […]'[27]

Using *Bildung* as a general framework, Berman unravels the ways in which Romantic theories of translation foregrounded the moment of the experience or encounter with the 'foreign' (the uncanny, *merveilleux, unheimlich*). The singularity of their contribution to a modern theory of translation stemmed precisely from their emphasis on the foreign as such, in opposition to a mere assimilation or appropriation, which they considered to be the hallmark of the French translations of the time. With the Romantics, the problem of translation began to be posed outside of simple rhetorical and philological comments. Looking beyond the simplistic dichotomy of fidelity vs. betrayal, translation became the name of a literary, historical and cultural *experience.* Their interest in reposing the problem in such a way was sparked by Luther's translation of the Latin Bible, which 'unified' German language (*Verdeutschung*) through recourse to spoken German dialects rather than imposing a language from

[23] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign, p. 43.*
[24] Ibid., p. 44.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign, p. 39; L'épreuve de* l'étranger (Paris: Editions Flammarion, 1998) p. 68.
[27] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign, p. 45*.

above.[28] Translation theory flourished in a certain cosmopolitical ideal that Berman seeks to unravel through the notion of the 'trial of the foreign' (*l'épreuve de l'étranger*). The result of this important study is a highly particular construction, based on the dialogically complex relations between France and Germany on the one hand, and between Classical and modern humanisms on the other. It crucially points to the opposition between two forms of cultural universalism. According to Berman, the cunning of post-Enlightenment German thought lay in its articulation of cultural progress with a linguistic pluralism that has been entirely repressed in the modern and post-revolutionary French philosophical imaginary. Figuring at once the transformability of culture and the relation to the 'foreign', translation reveals itself to be the pivot of this complex historical dialogue.

The Experience of the Foreign was published in the wake of the 'Romantic moment of French thought,'[29] itself entangled with the reception of Benjamin's works on the Early Romantics. In parallel to Peter Szondi's *Poésie et Poétique de l'idéalisme allemand* (1975) and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's *L'Absolu littéraire* (1978),[30] Berman sought to reactualize Romanticism as the ground or 'unconscious' of literary modernity. But whereas Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy focused on the question of literature, Berman seeks this actuality in the problem of translation.[31] According to Berman, the Early Romantics provide at once the historical genealogy and the theoretical ground for the incipient field of translation studies.

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[28] Ibid.*, p. 24.*

[29] See: Marc Cerisuelo, 'En quête d'un absolu relatif. Le moment romantique de la pensée française', *Critique* 745-746 (2009), pp. 501-511. Other names in Cerisuelo's narrative of this 'Romantic moment of French thought' include: Maurice Blanchot, Tzvetan Todorov and Jean-Marie Schaeffer. What characterizes the French revival of Romanticism is, according to him, its emphasis on 'modern literature as *désoeuvrement* and as critique' (p. 504), at the expense of a broader historical view, and especially of the theme of the crisis of the Ancient and the Moderns (p. 505).

[30] To this list one can add Maurice de Gandillac, one of the principal translators of Benjamin's works in French, and Jacques Derrida, who lectured on 'the Task of the Translator' in his 1976 seminar at Yale. See: Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 236.

[31] As a result, Berman tends to read Benjamin's study of Early Romanticism, *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (1921) through the prism of 'The Task of the Translator' (1923). Importantly, Berman devoted to 'The Task of the Translator' a year-long seminar at the *Collège International de Philosophie* in 1984-1985. His lectures were posthumously published in Antoine Berman, Isabelle Berman, and Valentina Sommella, *L'Age de la traduction : La tâche du traducteur* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires Vincennes, 2008).

Like criticism, translation is a figure of potentiation or amplification (*Erweiterung*) of the artwork. As Berman writes, '[t]he Romantic program of translations is heteronomous, designed *apriori* by the critical program.'[32] Yet, as he unravels in the five central chapters of his book, translation is pivotal to various aspects of the *Athenaum*'s reflections on poetry, artworks and literary forms, and in particular as a thematization, illustration, repetition, of poetic experience itself.[33] In translation, the Romantic theory of *language* is involved at the double level of *pure poetic form* (as elevation) and *infinite versability* (as transformation).[34] In the first place, 'the Romantic theory of language is entirely dependent on the theory of the artwork and of poetry,'[35] which fundamentally relies on the 'destruction of the natural referential structure of language'. The language of art (*Kunstprache*) is set in opposition to natural language (*Natursprache*).[36] In this sense, translation is both an instance *and* a paradigm of the Romantic theory of poetry as distanced or auratic language. As Berman explains:

> […] this set of movements by which, in translation, the foreign becomes familiar, the familiar foreign, etc., is identical to that by which the (Romantic) work tries to deny natural language and to rid itself of any empirical connection. In this sense, the translation of a literary work is, as it were, the translation of a translation. And the double movement which characterizes the Romantic text, which makes the near distant and the distant near, is in effect the aim of translation: In the translated text the foreign is certainly made near but, also, the near (the translator's mother tongue) is, as it were, distanced and made foreign.[37]

In the second place, the Romantic theory of translation needs to be grasped from the viewpoint of the 'orientation to the whole', which characterizes the Romantics' encyclopedic ambition: as a form of systematization and universalization. According to Berman, Novalis' *Encyclopedia* and F. Schlegel's 'progressive universal poetry' are sustained by a theory of generalised translatability, exploring how all genres, sciences

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[32] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, p. 126.

[33] 'If true poetry is the elevation of natural language to the state of mystery, and if translation constitutes, as it were, a doubling of this movement, then one may well state that *Dichten* is originally *Übersetzen*. Or: To the transcendental translation carried out by poetry (romantization) corresponds empirical translation, for example, the passage of a work from one language to another.' Ibid., p. 99.

[34] For Berman, the term 'versability' crystallizes the specificity of the Romantic project: both as one of unification of poetry and philosophy, (versability comes from *verse*) and as the indefinite *movement* at play in potentiation or 'romanticisation' (as in version, inversion, conversion, interversion or in the French *versement.*). Ibid., pp. 77-8.

[35] Ibid., p. 88. Translation modified.

[36] Ibid., pp. 90-1.

[37] Ibid., p. 99.

or forms can 'fuse' into one another. Translation functions as an 'operative concept which is not thematized as such, but which organises the unfolding of this thinking.'[38] Translation in the 'narrow', practical or literary sense is thereby generalised and dissolved in the 'ontological' paradigm of infinite transformability. Therefore, it does not only refer to the poetic fragment but also, in Novalis' words, to the 'infinite versability of the cultivated (*gebildeten*) understanding.'[39] At once transformation and voyage, translation is a common operator between the theories of language, of the artwork, and of subjectivity. As F. Schlegel writes:

> A work of art is cultivated when it is […] completely faithful to itself. Entirely homogeneous, and nonetheless exalted above itself. Like the education of a young Englishman, the most important thing about it is the Grand Tour. It should have traveled through all the three or four continents of humanity, not in order to round the edges of individuality, but to broaden its own vision and give its spirit more freedom and inner versatility, and thereby greater independence and self-sufficiency.[40]

For Berman, this excerpt in Schlegel holds particular significance. It clearly illustrates the passage from the *humanistic* conception of translation as *Bildung* we find in Goethe, to the *poetic* conception of translation developed by the Romantics. As he writes, '[t]ranslation is an *Erweiterung*, but now in an idealist sense.'[41] With the Romantics, completed by Hölderlin's works, the 'trial of the foreign' takes a *speculative* turn. According to Berman, this move deepens, complexifies, and opens up the problem of translation to its own philosophical modernity.[42] However, by loosening translation's connexion to 'its referential soil,'[43] it also proves unable to preserve the specificity of translation *vis-à-vis* other forms of poetic and literary transformations.

Cautious of the shortcomings present in the work of the German Romantics' speculative theory of translation, Berman suggests we supplement it with a conception of translation more directly embedded both in the activity of translators and in 'concrete

[38] Ibid., p. 85.
[39] Ibid., p. 78.
[40] Ibid., p. 108.
[41] Ibid., p. 108.
[42] However, Berman contrasts the 'modernity' brought about by Hölderlin to that of the Romantics. Whilst in both cases, it is associated to a 'positive' configuration of translation, in Hölderlin's case this positivity is less formal and more directly cultural (and thus more in line with Berman's own project), it is a 'culturally creative act' which *contests* or *resists* the 'reduction' of the foreign. Ibid., p. 170.
[43] Ibid., p. 100.

cultural communication.'[44] These are natural language based approaches that he finds in Goethe, Herder, Humboldt, Schleiermacher and Hölderlin. As Berman claims, '[t]he speculative theory of translation and the intransitive theory of poetry are […] 'things of the past', whatever may be the 'modern' finery with which they adorn themselves. They block the way of the historical, cultural, and linguistic dimension of translation and poetry. And it is this dimension which is beginning to reveal itself at the present day.'[45] However, Berman's move to this 'historical dimension' remains mediated by the concept of *Bildung*, which has the effect of giving a circular character to his argument. On his account, the nineteenth century emergence of a *positive* valuation of translation was the direct correlate of the German Romantic *Bildung*'s impulse towards pluralisation and alterity. Likewise, what he terms the *non-ethnocentric* theory of translation shall function as a humanist stance against the illusions of cultural and linguistic self-sufficiency in the late twentieth-century.[46]

The Ethics of Translation

Aside from its exegetical purpose, Berman's work puts forward a critical reactualization of Romanticism for the present, spelled out in a programmatic form in its introduction and conclusion, under the heading of a history, ethics and analytic of translation. Berman proposes nothing less than a 'Copernician revolution' which, by ascribing translation a real 'epistemological dignity', would finally be able to revoke its 'ancillary character' and found translation studies as a discipline of its own. As a practice and operation, Berman explains, translation 'is the carrier of a knowledge *sui generis* on languages, literatures, cultures, movements of exchange and contact, etc.'[47] and thus constitutes an autonomous domain of inquiry. However, the main specificity of Berman's study lies in its formulation of an *ethics of translation*, itself grounded on his archaeological study of German Romantic thought. 'Romantic and Classical Germany had already reached the awareness' Berman writes, that 'translation is not a

[44] Ibid., p. 134.
[45] Ibid., p. 18.
[46] 'The work to be done in modern French, in order to make it capable of welcoming that literary domain authentically -that is to say, without ethnocentrism- shows quite clearly that we are concerned here, in and through translation, with a participation in this movement of decentring and change that our literature (our culture) needs if it wants to find again an image and an experience of itself which it has partly […] lost since classicism.' Ibid., p.19.
[47] Ibid., p. 181.

mere mediation' but 'a process in which our entire relation to the Other is played out.'[48] Following a famous Lévi-Straussian trope, Berman argues that every culture wants to think itself as a 'pure and unmixed whole'. For Lévi-Strauss, as he wrote in 1960, men have always perceived the 'diversity of culture […] as a monstrosity or a scandal.'[49] The central task of translation, its 'ethical' aim (*visée*) is, therefore, to *counter* this ethnocentric tendency by 'fecundating the proper through the mediation of the foreign.'[50] At the practical level, it means risking rendering translation palpable by privileging the literalness of the text.[51] Yet, this can only be done through what Berman designates as an 'analytic of translation', which requires the translator to 'examine the systems of deformations' of her practice, be they linguistic, ideological, psychical or literary. Berman's 'analytic' does not simply refer to what Gadamer developed as the interpreter's 'prejudices', but to a linguistic psychological conditioning. At the heart of the translation process lies a translation drive, which posits the 'ontological superiority' of the language of the other, at the expense of her own.[52] This drive to transcend the finitude of language and to suppress linguistic differences constitutes the 'bad sublimation' or 'metaphysical tendency' (*visée métaphysique*) of translation, by contradistinction to its 'ethical tendency' (*visée éthique*). For Berman, it is imperative that the 'speculative' be held in check through the ethical. Berman's ethics of translation thus separates the two moments analysed in the Romantic conception of *Bildung*, suspending its metaphysical *telos* while holding onto its fundamental impulse.

The Experience of the Foreign is systematic in its attempt at playing one side of this literature against the other: to assert the translational, hermeneutic *experience* against the national spirit's closure upon itself. Yet, Berman never really addresses this experience except for relying on the vocabulary of hospitality and ethnocentrism of his contemporaries. In doing so, he obscures the reference to Ancient languages, so paramount in Romanticism. Referring to ancient language through the prism of foreign *European* language and vice versa, the Romantics, like Humboldt or Schleiermacher, were conflating the foreignness of the past and the foreignness of other Western

[48] Ibid., p. 180.
[49] Claude Lévi-Strauss, 'Race et Histoire' in *Le Racisme devant la science*, p. 14.
[50] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign,* p. 4. Translation modified.
[51] Barbara Godard, 'L'Éthique du traduire : Antoine Berman et le "virage éthique" en traduction', *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 14 (2001), p. 61.
[52] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, p. 8.

nations, applying the anthropological trope of 'non-coevalness' within Europe.[53] The 'experience of the foreign' is above all a *restricted* and delimited destabilisation; it designates an elective relationship to canonical European cultural productions.[54] Staying in control of this destabilisation is as important as the destabilising movement itself. This idea was formulated particularly clearly by Humboldt: 'As long as one feels the foreign (*Fremdheit*), but not the strange (*Fremde*), the translation has reached its highest goal; but where the strange appears as such, probably obscures the foreign, the translator betrays that he is not up to his original.'[55] To find such a point of equilibrium between the proper and the foreign is also at the centre of Hang-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, which positions itself precisely *in between* the strangeness and the familiarity of the text.[56] As Gadamer shows, it is in so far as this dual movement is a gentle mediation, that the process of translation can be grasped as a process of universalization.[57] From these brief remarks it appears that Berman's reactualization of the 'experience of the foreign' overshadows not only the thorny problem of nationality but also the question of *tradition*: modelled upon the authors of Antiquity, the 'foreign' must be at once outside and inside the tradition for an authentic 'experience' to take place.[58]

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[53] On the concept of 'coevalness', see Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1983).

[54] The Romantic 'internationalist' mythology is one that some contemporary specialists of Romanticism remain strongly attached to. Yet there is an ambivalence that plays itself out throughout this literature, between the 'international' thrust of Romanticism and its inherent eurocentrism. Lombardo and Roger, for example, affirm at the same time that 'romanticism does not correspond to any national identity, but to an international of ideas', and that 'romanticism is a phenomenon that is [at once] perfectly European and transnational.' Patrizia Lombardo and Philippe Roger, 'L'Europe romantique', *Critique* 745-746 (2009) pp. 451-2.

[55] 'Solange nicht die Fremdheit, sondern das Fremde gefühlt wird, hat die Uebersetzung ihre höchsten Zwecke erreicht; wo aber die Fremdheit an sich erscheint, und vielleicht gar das Fremde verdunkelt, da verräth der Uebersetzer, dass er seinem Original nicht gewachsen ist.' Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Einleitung zu Agamemnon', *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann, (Berlin: Behr, 1903-1936), vol. 8, p. 132; quoted in Antoine Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, p. 154. Translation modified.

[56] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Revised Edition (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), p. 295.

[57] 'Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another not in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other.' Ibid., p. 304.

[58] Gadamer puts this clearly when he writes that '[…] the other world we encounter is not only foreign but is also related to us. It has not only its own truth *in itself* but also its own truth *for us*.' Ibid., p. 439.

While Antoine Berman's ethics of translation is not as widely known, it was Lawrence Venuti's, *The Scandals of Translation, Towards an Ethics of Difference* (1998) that contributed to disseminating the notion of a 'foreignizing translation' in the anglophone context. Acknowledging Berman's influence, Venuti reframed his translation ethics into an idiom better adapted to confront global times:

> The ethnocentric violence of translation is inevitable: in the translating process, foreign languages, texts, and cultures will always undergo some degree and form of reduction, exclusion, inscription. Yet the domestic work on foreign cultures can be a *foreignizing intervention*, pitched to question existing canons at home.[59]

Venuti argues for the 'demystifying' aspect of a good translation, which 'manifests in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text.'[60] Whilst Venuti's works bring back the question of nationalism to the centre of his analysis, admitting that 'Schleiermacher's theory is shaky ground on which to build a translation ethics to combat ethnocentrism,'[61] the thrust of his argument remains overall very close to Berman's. The notion of *Bildung*, with its foreignizing vs. domesticating dichotomy, functions as a vanishing mediator in this move from the (Enlightenment) 'national' to the (post-war) 'cultural', as well as between the literary and the ethical. Berman and Venuti postulate a kind of transitivity between the presence of the other's language *as foreign* within the linguistic body of the *Kulturnation* and the 'otherness' of the anthropological or cultural 'other', thus entirely overlooking the important transformations undergone in anthropology since then. The very use of the term 'foreign' suffices to highlight what immediately troubles such a continuity, as it plays on the full ambivalence of the term, verging on the frightening (*unheimlich*) and yet, in the last resort, amenable to translation, thus providing a perfect partner for limit-experiences. A 'good' translation is a *hospitable* one, it is a translation that punctures the 'immunity' of the nation.[62]

As much as it requires the drawing of clear linguistic boundaries, Berman's ethics is still fundamentally predicated upon the reinstantiation of the 'organismic' metaphor of

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[59] Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), p. 310. My emphasis.
[60] Venuti quoted in Barbara Godard, 'L'Éthique du traduire […]', p. 56.
[61] Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility*, p. 111.
[62] Balibar, 'Universalité bourgeoise et différences anthropologiques', p. 488.

Bildung as national-linguistic principle of unity. Berman's *Experience of the Foreign* seeks to conjure up nationalistic limitations by drawing on the importance of translation as counter-narrative to that of nationalism. By doing so, he works immanently to the German conception of *Bildung* in order to suspend its course, drawing on the structure of the 'evolutive' cultural process as an experience of encounter and alteration through the 'foreign'. Although Berman's work points the way to the necessity of framing translation studies within history, to the importance of 'showing how in each period or in each given historical setting the practice of translation is articulated in relation to the practice of literature, of languages, of the several intercultural and interlinguistic exchanges,'[63] this history remains entirely framed within European history and more particularly, within the French-German exchanges. The important point to be stressed here is not so much that Berman's theory is situated before or outside of the cultural-historical problematic of colonisation and globalization (and thus remains paradigmatically euro-centred), as to display the limitations of a theory of cultural experience that remains immanent to the movement of *Bildung* as mode of self-intelligibility. Hence, Berman's unreflective passage between German Romantic theories of translation and the configuration of a post-war 'ethics of hospitality' precisely *highlights* what renders his own theory unfit for so-called postcolonial times. For the relationships between the self and the other, the proper and the foreign are not only mediated by *languages*, but also by the logic of *nationality* in its cultural and political efficacy. As a result, they cannot be critically re-signified without a reflection on the history and the politics of nationalism.

[63] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign,* p. 2.

The Organismic Metaphor of the Nation

> The customary defence of foreign words shares with purism the notion of language as something organic, despite the fact that each measures the life of language by a different rhythm.[64]

In contrast to its deterritorialization in ethics, a number of recent interventions have proposed to reinscribe the *Bildung* problematic within its historical context of emergence by exploring various aspects of its vast metaphorics, particularly in relation to what has been called 'the organismic metaphor' of the nation. In *Spectral Nationality*, Pheng Cheah has shown that the latter constituted a crucial channel of exchanges between German philosophy and anti-colonial thought. Cheah patiently marks the 'territorializations and deterritorializations' of the 'model' of 'purposive causality' as 'actualization of freedom',[65] from Kant, Hegel and Fichte to Fanon, Cabral, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Pramoedya Ananta Toer. According to Cheah, the 'organismic metaphor' of the nation is a 'philosopheme' that functions as a dominant 'ontological paradigm for the political'[66] as model for the transcendence of finitude. He explains this theoretical continuity by a number of 'historical and conjunctural affinities between the rise of German cultural nationalism in various political states following Napoleonic conquest and Third World decolonisation', a common experience which can be grasped, broadly speaking as an abrupt encounter with modernity.[67] In both contexts, the question of the national language and the 'revivification of a vernacular national culture', as well as the non-identity between nation and state were among the crucial stakes in the encounter. Rather than considering the 'organismic metaphor of the nation' as a

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[64] Theodor W. Adorno, 'On the use of foreign words' in *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) p. 287.

[65] Pheng Cheah, *Spectral Nationality: Passages of Freedom from Kant to Postcolonial Literatures of Liberation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 10, 19 & 381.

[66] Ibid., p. 235.

[67] 'In the centers of the Industrial Revolution (France and England), the experience was less intense because modernity came at a more moderate pace. But for peoples elsewhere (Germany, Africa, and Asia, for example), the encounter was abrupt and greatly accelerated. Thus, instead of being an ideological mystification, the *organismic metaphor* can be seen as fundamental to a new rational understanding of human action and purposive causality that tried to make sense of this intense experience. The fact that these ideas received their first elaborate formalization in German philosophy does not make decolonizing and postcolonial nationalisms derivative of a European model. They are comparable responses to a common experience of intense structural transformation—whether this takes the form of Napoleonic invasion, nineteenth- century territorial imperialism, or uneven globalization.' Ibid., p. 6. Emphasis added.

backwards and inward-looking fiction, Cheah proposes to focus on its emancipatory dimensions.[68]

Whereas Cheah proposes to read Third World anticolonialism through the prism of *Bildung* philosophies, Rebecca Comay ventures to read *Bildung* philosophies through a postcolonial prism. Her account stresses the biological and racial connotations of this model, by analysing its historical conditions of emergence in the post-1789 moment. Generalising Marx's own 1843 analysis,[69] she argues that the 'substitution of cultural for political accomplishment'[70] operated by German idealism is primarily a reaction to the French revolution in the sense of a lack, a mourning of something that had not taken place, a sense of belatedness. The Napoleonic conquest forced Germany into a movement of self-reinvention, of which language and literature were the touchstones, enabling '[…] Germany to absorb the fruits of the French revolution without having to undergo the turmoil of actual revolution.'[71] On this account, the Romantic reframing of German language in the European literary scene takes an entirely different meaning, that of a pre-emptive treatment to revolutionary contamination and Napoleonic conquest.[72] Comay asks: 'What is it about revolution—the revolution (is it one or many?)— that thwarts translation even as it seems to stimulate it?'[73] As with Cheah, the gap or *décalage* with modernity, the haunting of a foreign intervention and the civilizational yardstick are at the heart of Comay's analysis. In an act of cunning Comay

[68] 'The repeated representation of the people and their revolutionary culture as the bearer of life is directly continuous with the organismic metaphor of the social and political body inaugurated by German idealism, which associated freedom with the causality of culture and organic life. Indeed, from this perspective, the putative antithesis between cosmopolitan universalism and nationalist particularism misleadingly obscures the fact that both philosophical nationalism and cosmopolitanism articulate universal institutional models for the actualization of freedom and are underwritten by the same organismic ontology' (Ibid., p. 2). This lineage has been further elaborated by Donna Jones in *The Racial Discourse of Life Philosophy*, in which she inquires into the effect of vitalism (in particular Bergson and Nietzsche) upon the Négritude philosophers (Senghor and Césaire). See Donna V. jones, *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy - Negritude, Vitalism, and Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[69] Karl Marx, 'Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction' in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (Penguin Books, London, 1992), pp. 243-257.

[70] Rebecca Comay, *Mourning Sickness: Hegel and the French Revolution* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2010), p. 11.

[71] Ibid., p. 12.

[72] 'Translation promises not only a retroactive fortification against invasion, but a preemptive takeover of the assailant's forces. It hints of a symbolic reversal of imperial power: the transformation of vanquished into victors, colonized into colonizers, within the inverted empire of signs.' Ibid., p. 14.

[73] Ibid., p. 13.

brings German idealism in close proximity to the problematic posed to anti-colonial movements whilst highlighting its own imperialistic dimensions:

> Translation, here, needs to be grasped from the perspective of its Roman and medieval usage of *translatio imperii*. 'The empire never dies.' But it travels and transforms. While remaining indestructible, the empire undergoes multiple 'translations' as its center keeps moving and as its shape and meaning shift. […] Translation in the narrow sense, that is, the translation of texts, the transmission of learning, and the diffusion of tradition (*translatio studii et verbi*), plays a special ideological role in this epic transfer. The construction of a continuous cultural legacy helps soften the abruptness of transition, fill the vacuum of interregnum, and mask the violence of conquest. Translation provides a transitional space in which the displacements of empire can be endured at a figural level: it allows loss to become virtual or 'metaphorical'— a *translatio* of *translatio*. We could consider this second-order translation a work of mourning.[74]

From the perspective of the *translatio imperii* leading from the Greeks and Romans, to Byzantium, to the Franks, the Lombards and the Germans, Luther's intervention appears as an especially 'sly' adaptation of the imperial 'scheme to promote his own vision of Germany's special world historical mission', one in which the *translatio imperii* becomes a 'translatio evangelii', of the divine word and grace.[75] Through the prism of Comay's interpretation, the Romantics' positive valuation of translation is no more than a new episode of this 'drama of legitimation' translated from one historical centre to another. Such an exogenous reading of the emergence of 'translation' as a problem for modern European philosophy fundamentally troubles the ethical and humanist accounts of the latter.

What these perspectives on the history of empires and imperialism show is that there is a fundamental discrepancy between the 'other' of the humanist (or hermeneutic) ethos and the 'anthropological' other. As we have shown, this discontinuity tends to be concealed by post-war humanism and its immediate ethical redeeming of cultural diversity. As long as the idea of translation remains entangled in the latter, it cannot serve as a new, or alternative paradigm for cultural and literary theory for it relies on an unreflective reversal and an illegitimate *substitution of alterities*. This is what motivates the search for a philosophical conceptualisation of translation able to reframe the latter as a *relation* that would not be *primarily* defined anthropologically as

[74] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[75] Ibid., pp. 16-7.

a relation to the 'other'. Arguably, the emergence of a translational paradigm in postcolonial theory has precisely been a response to this need to elaborate another philosophy of historical processes and cultural encounters, one that would not articulate them through nation-building or through the organismic logics of inclusion-exclusion, identity-difference, but through a different linguistic-cultural paradigm, at once *critical* of the latter and *constructive* on its own terms.

Frantz Fanon's thought is in many ways emblematic of this double and paradoxical philosophical task, in so far as he drew on the emancipatory dimensions of Hegelianism whilst attempting to transform its mediations -thinking them from a different *historical standpoint*. In his reflections on cultural decolonisation, Fanon elaborates a notion of 'national culture' that is clearly predicated on an organismic imaginary and yet entirely structured by the political interruption of decolonisation, which produces a general deflagration at the level of socio-cultural relations. At the same time Fanon's philosophy is also emblematic of this double philosophical task at the *theoretical*, or *epistemological* level, since his work has opened up new fields of investigation and has since remained paradigmatic in the foundation of postcolonial theory. Addressing Fanon at a philosophical level means producing a conceptual framework by which his philosophy can be adequately addressed. If the postcolonial is grasped as a reflexive doubling of anticolonialism, whose task is to trace the emergence of an *epistemic* point of view beyond or outside Europe,[76] then the postcolonial is fundamentally predicated on the possibility of translating Western theoretical and philosophical terms.[77] Our analysis of Fanon proposes to illuminate the way in which translation constitutes at the same time an 'actual' and 'methodic' condition of possibility of postcolonialism as a discourse critical of the West that is nonetheless from the West, hence as a decentring critique functioning through rupture and resumption.[78]

[76] The question of epistemological decolonisation has been developed at length by Matthieu Renault in *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2011). In particular, see: pp. 21-31 & 205-9.

[77] Dipesh Chakrabarty has clearly framed this as a confrontation between the categories of Western scholarship (and in his case, historiography in particular) and non-Western 'life-worlds'. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000)

[78] This idea has been very convincingly articulated by Matthieu Renault, to which my own analysis owes a great deal.

2. Retranslating the Mediation : Frantz Fanon

> The mediation takes vengeance by substantializing itself.[79]

As Robert Young pointed out, the term 'translation' is almost entirely absent from Fanon's lexicon, and yet it can be conceived as a fruitful thread of intelligibility throughout his works.[80] Although the French language is the primary and paramount instrument of assimilation, emancipation from colonialism is never equated to a reversal or rejection of French language and culture as a whole, but takes the form of a mutation of its meaning as instrument, as a cultural and social medium. The problem of language, writes Fanon in the opening chapter of *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) is indistinguishable from the question of culture: 'To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization.'[81] Fanon's views on language must be read through the prism of the instrumental status of French language for the Antillean subject. For the Antillean, French is, above all, a 'tool of inhabitation of the white world,' immersing the [colonial subject] in a world in which he is everywhere an outsider.[82] Entering French is never entering a *mere language*, but immediately partaking into the colonial system and its hierarchy of assimilation. Whilst French language constitutes, for the colonised, an increase of power (*puissance*),[83] it also marks the mastery of colonialism upon the colonial subject: 'To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Black who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is. '[84]

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[79] Frantz Fanon, 'Racism and Culture' in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 42.

[80] Robert Young, 'Frantz Fanon and the Enigma of Cultural Translation,' *Translation* 1 (2012), pp. 91-100.

[81] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 1986), p. 17.

[82] As Renault notes, this constitutes a displacement of Merleau-Ponty's conception of language as a life-world, which implies that one can only 'fully' live in one life-world at once. Matthieu Renault, 'Frantz Fanon et les langages Décoloniaux. Contribution à Une Généalogie de La Critique Postcoloniale,' (*Doctoral thesis*, Université Paris 7 Denis Diderot & Universita degli Studi di Bologna, 2011), pp. 77-78.

[83] Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 14 & p. 31.

[84] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 38. Translation modified.

The ability to speak, and to speak *well*, is always double-sided. For if language is something that one possesses or 'takes hold of', it is also something that paradigmatically 'takes hold of us': as Fanon writes, '[t]o take also means on several levels being taken.'[85] Assimilation 'brings culture' at the same time as it imprisons the colonised subject in its infinitely expandable net. If acquiring the subtleties of the French idiom means 'proving to oneself that one has measured up to the culture'[86] (*se prouver à eux-même une adéquation à la culture*), it is, for Fanon, the first reaction available to the colonised, his first illusion of emancipation. In opposition to Senghor, who theorized the 'double world' in terms of complementarity and synthesis, but also by contrast to DuBois' or Wright's conception of double-consciousness as (enabling) double-view, Fanon thinks this duality as a founding, and 'unsurpassable contradiction.'[87] For Fanon, the valorization of local creoles is always a condescending move of some sort.[88] This contestable thesis needs to be understood in light of Fanon's conception of language as a theory of *reference*, both in a psychoanalytic and cultural sense. When two Antillean students encounter in Paris, Fanon explains, they can either 'stand with the white world, that is, the true world', or 'reject Europe [...] and cling together in their dialect, making themselves quite comfortable in the Martinican *Umwelt*.'[89] Both in the colony and the metropole, picking one's language means situating oneself on either side of the 'colour line', *stating* one's side. As Renault correctly notes, if the French and Creole linguistic-cultural 'worlds' are not translatable into one another, it is *not because* of their lack of contact, on the contrary: '[i]t is the prohibition of cultural translation that causes the irreducibility of cultural differences, not the reverse.'[90]

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[85] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox, Reprint edition (New York: Grove Press, 2005), p. 163.

[86] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 39. Translation modified. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1971), p. 30.

[87] Renault, 'Frantz Fanon et les langages décoloniaux', p. 73.

[88] A strong critique to this aspect of Fanon's thought was famously articulated by Edouard Glissant in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989) and by Jean Barnabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant in *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creolness*, bilingual edition, trans. Taleb Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).

[89] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* p. 37*; Peau noire, Masques blancs,* p. 29. Translation modified.

[90] Renault, 'Frantz Fanon et les langages décoloniaux', p. 80.

The Other's Other

Fanon had no illusion concerning UNESCO's magnifying *Declarations on Race* and their 'spectacular and useless condemnations of racism.'[91] As he antagonistically stated during the *First Congress of Black Writers and Artists* held in Paris in 1956, 'to study the relations between racism and culture is to raise the question of their reciprocal action.'[92] Fanon already perceived that the crude biological or 'phenotypical' racism would die its own death but would be quickly substituted by a 'cultural racism': '[t]he object of racism is no longer the particular man but a certain *form of existing*.'[93] According to Fanon, racism is the result of the systematic oppression of a people, the effects of which can be psychologically, somatically, and even biologically measured in racialized subjects. 'What I want to do is help the black man to free himself of the arsenal of complexes that has been developed by the colonial environment.'[94] In *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon develops what could be termed a 'psychic topography' of race,[95] that is, an account of how race structures both physical and psychical spaces. The space of race is a specular space, which reflects to the Black a distorted image of himself. Whilst the Black identifies with the White as the latter is, in Lacanian terms, 'the primordial imago of the double upon which the [black] self models itself',[96] the Black remains, for the White, the 'true other (*autrui*), the non-I, which means the non-identifiable, the non-assimilable.'[97] As the Black identifies with the White, the latter situation (this non-identification with the Black) is also lived by the black. Thus, as Matthieu Renault puts it, the Black's self-perception is constantly 'overdetermined' by the white imaginary.[98] The Black's double bind is to simultaneously identify *against* the Blacks (as any other French *subject*) and to perceive himself *as* he or she is projected in the collective unconscious, as the White's other, hence as the 'personification of these unconscious contents'. [99] The Black must permanently live with his racial image as

[91] Fanon, 'Race and Culture', in *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 39.
[92] Ibid., p. 32.
[93] Ibid. Emphasis added and translation modified.
[94] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 30.
[95] Renault, *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, p. 40.
[96] Ibid., p. 50.
[97] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks,* note 25, p. 161.
[98] Renault, *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme'*, pp. 49-50.
[99] Ibid., p. 48. It is interesting to compare this analysis with George Lamming's own formulation of the problem, which is also influenced by both DuBois and existentialism, but not psychoanalysis: 'The negro writer is a writer who, through a process of social and historical

double, a double which circulates through signs, images and representations in the form of ubiquitous interpellations.[100] At the centre of racial alienation, there is, for Fanon, a psychic and bodily 'overdetermination from without,'[101] which he also addresses as the impossible recognition of the black subject.

'Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him. As long as he has not been effectively recognized by the other, that other will remain the theme of his actions.'[102] For Fanon, the colonial world is an anti-dialectical world in the sense that the colonised remains fixed or arrested in the moment of 'being for another'.[103] Translating Hegel's master-slave dialectic into the colonial situation, Fanon underscores that the slave cannot liberate himself through his work, because he 'turns himself towards the master and abandons the object', thus proving to be 'less independent than the Hegelian slave.'[104] To this need for reciprocity, the White only responds with indifference. Slave emancipation had not been, for Fanon, the result of a dialectical process.

> The upheaval reached the Negroes from without. The black man was acted upon. Values that had not been created by his actions, values that had not been born of the systolic tide of his blood, danced in a hued whirl round him. The upheaval did not make a difference in the Negro [le nègre]. He went from one way of life to another, but not from one life to another.[105]

Fanon's narrative of transformation through anticolonial struggle engages the colonised into a dialectical process, which is both the condition of freedom and the condition of history. For Fanon, the *Négritude* thinkers have remained prisoners of the

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accidents, encounters himself, so to speak, in a category of men called Negro. He carries this definition like a limb. It travels with him as a necessary guide for the Other's regard. It has settled upon him with an almost natural finality, until he has become it. He is a relunctant part of the conspiracy which identifies him with that condition which the Other has created for them both.' George Lamming, 'The Negro writer and his world', *Présence Africaine*, special issue 8-9-10, (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956), p. 321.

[100] See : Noémi Michel, 'Quand les mots et les images blessent: postcolonialité, égalité et politique des actes de discours en Suisse et en France', *Doctoral Thesis* (University of Geneva, 2014), pp. 63-4.

[101] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 116.

[102] Ibid., pp. 216-7.

[103] Renault, *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme*, pp. 55-6 ; *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 88.

[104] Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, note 8, p. 221.

[105] Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, p. 220. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs,* p. 178.

specular character of race.[106] Affirming a black essence, a 'black truth' is only a temporary solution to the neurotic situation described in *Black Skin White Masks*. It is a fundamentally 'reactive' behaviour, a safeguarding through the fixation of identity. Fanon is precisely looking for a thought and practice that *breaks through* the circle of specularity:[107] 'Concern with the elimination of a vicious circle has been the only guide-line for my efforts.'[108] However, it is worth pointing out that Fanon does not merely condemn *Négritude* as an affirmation of an 'African essence' and a 'black truth,'[109] he *integrates* it as the necessary moment of the consciousness' experience towards freedom. Only by valorizing and identifying with the nègre, with the negative, only by leaping into self-destruction, may the subject hope to dissolve the alienation caused by race.[110] In *Wretched of the Earth*, it is the violence of the war of decolonisation, which will play that role at the level of the collective. For Fanon, violence consitutes the very possibility of the return of historical movement; it is, writes Renault, the 'passage from colonial anti-dialectic, where every mediation is forbidden, to decolonial dialectic'.[111] By abruptly rupturing the colonised' desire for recognition, violence transforms colonised society and creates a space for the re-signification of the content of his or her experience.

Fanon's conception of culture is multiple because it is sustained by two opposite versions of universalization. On the one hand, Fanon reinstated the 'organismic metaphor' of the nation by offering the unity of the people as telos. On the other, Fanon pondered over forms of historico-cultural relations that would not rely on the Hegelian narrative of recognition but rather on forms of inter-human reciprocity.[112] As early as 1956, Fanon indeed proposed to de-ethnologize the nascent notion of cultural relativism. He did not merely seek to relativize, but to suppress, the position of the

[106] Among these thinkers, we can mention figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Louis Achilles and Alioune Diop.
[107] 'Man set free from the springboard that is the resistance of the other, and digging into its own flesh to find a meaning.' Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 11.
[108] Ibid., p. 12.
[109] Ibid., p. 185.
[110] Ibid., p. 159.
[111] Renault, 'Frantz Fanon et Les Langages Décoloniaux', p. 252.
[112] In 'Racism and Culture', his contribution to the *First Congress of Black Writers and Artists* (1956) Fanon argued that 'universality resides in this decision to recognize and accept the reciprocal relativism of different cultures, once the colonial status is irreversibly excluded.' *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier, New edition (New York: Grove Press, 1994), p. 44.

observer. His critique of Western 'science' does not consist of a critique of anthropology as a 'discourse of power' or a scientific falsification, but, more simply, of a critique of *exteriority*. The figures of the anthropologist or the ethnographer symbolize this exteriority most clearly. While the armchair anthropologist contemplates a culture from a remote place and inevitably fossilizes it, the ethnographer is in pursuit of a 'regard éloigné' (*distanced gaze*) while in the midst of his 'fieldwork'. According to Fanon, the colonial elite tends to apply to his own culture the same principle as the anthropologist: he fossilizes his culture as a precious jewel, which progressively empties itself out of substance. Holding onto this empty shell, which, like the surface of a mirror, has lost all its interpretive dimensions and retains only its external marks, the colonial elite becomes the prisoner of tradition. Fanon's vocabulary of cultural reappropriation, then, is entirely directed by a Nietzschean call to the 'revitalization' of culture. Against the affirmation of a black essence, sensual embodiment and rhythm, Fanon unravels the collective movement of struggle and its autonomous transformation of sense. While Fanon's thought situates itself by opposition to Senghor's conception of cultural métissage as peaceful exchange, it also remains in a conflictual intimacy with the Négritude thinkers, who had critically addressed, before him, the 'gift' of French language as something that could become an arm once 'turned against the master,' hence turned against itself, in a gesture of self-destruction, as Sartre would have it.[113] However, Fanon contests any direct route *from* literary modernism (epitomized by the figure of Césaire, the Martinican surrealist) *to* politics. Crucially Fanon takes into account the problematic exteriority of the exiled intellectual in relation to 'his people': it is a gulf that can only be resolved by the intellectual's own participation to the struggle, by his own *inner* incoporation by the collective in action.

Between the psychoanalytical diagnoses of colonised subjectivities and the messianic projection of the liberated subject as a 'new man', those two ends of a narrative written in the collective singular, Fanon describes a set of historical transformations, which can be seen as proceeding both from a series of violent ruptures and from new forms of subjectivation. For Fanon, a decolonial political praxis must first be sought in the realm of an existential *process*, that is, in the affirmation of man through the heroic transformation of himself. But this dialecticization of black existence is not a mere

[113] Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Black Orpheus', trans. John MacCombie, *The Massachusetts Review* 6, no.1 (1964-5), pp. 13-52.

means towards historical *resolution*.[114] Fanon's 'narrative of emancipation' ends with self-consciousness or with the realisation of the subjective conditions necessary to the struggle for political freedom. Such a radical opening of the process can be associated with Nietzsche's own 'displacement' of Hegel. For Nietzsche, as Antonia Birnbaum notes, '[t]he relation to the other no longer refers to the realization of a relation to oneself, or to the passage through alienation and the work of reappropriation that determine the self of consciousness.'[115] Eventually, what Fanon attempts to express are the collective effects of this liminal *passage* or 'travel through discontinuity.'[116] It is in this context that the concept of translation intervenes to capture the decolonisation process in its various sites, in the multiplicity of its mediation processes, which at once liberate, loosen the position of given elements and engage them in transformations that in turn can transform subjects. This figure of translation can be grasped, as I will now illustrate, as one of cultural liberation through semiotic transformation.

Translation as Semiotic Transformation

L'An V de la révolution algérienne (1959), translated in 1965 in English under the title *A Dying Colonialism*, and republished in French in 1972 as *Sociologie d'une révolution,* is a historically specific account of the restructuring of Algerian society in the torment of the decolonisation struggle. The five-chapter book narrates the constitution of what Fanon designates as 'a new man' through new social practices and relations; and this new man is placed in a dialectical relation to the birth of a 'national culture' at the level of the collective. Fanon aimed at showing that even if the independence war was still ongoing, the Algerian people was already, virtually independent. It had become the 'subject' of its own history and a 'sovereign nation'.[117] Though at first glance the text seems like a straighforward sociological study, it can be equally considered as an investigatory report or a revolutionary pamphlet. In the course of its five chapters, Fanon describes various socio-cultural 'mutations' as trajectories of radical self-

[114] For a synthetic account of the polemics surrounding the question of resolution and absence of resolution in Fanon's narrative of emancipation, see : David Marriott, 'Whither Fanon?' *Textual Practice* 25, no. 1 (2011), pp. 33–69.

[115] Antonia Birnbaum, *Nietzsche, les aventures de l'héroïsme* (Paris : Payot & Rivages, 2000), p. 146. Translation mine.

[116] Ibid., p. 143.

[117] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Pinguin Press, 1965), p. 159; Frantz Fanon, *L'an V de la révolution algérienne* (Paris: La Découverte, 2001), p. 172. Translation modified.

transformation at the level of historical experience. His account follows the development of a number of sociological realities as different standpoints on the revolution, while locating itself at the level of their 'life' or transformability. Not only is Fanon interested in the mutations in the social meanings of these different objects (the veil, the radio, medical knowledge), he also addresses their 'historical dynamism', that is to say their re-mediation through struggle. In this process, objects and subjects are mutually transformed; the struggle brings about 'new attitudes, new conducts, new modalities of appearing (*apparaître*).'[118] By enlarging the spectrum of the 'medium' in which revolution takes place to the entire cultural fabric of Algerian society, Fanon sets himself the task of developing a theory of cultural and semiotic transformations, which take place in both the material and linguistic realm. He thus provides us with a theory of epistemic translation that is at once a decolonisation of language and a deracialization of culture. In stark opposition to a reactive, traditionalist 'diving into the past', which for Fanon constitutes the mainspring of the Negritude movement, emancipation is equated with a *passage through different languages*. For him, appropriating 'culture' does not mean appropriating 'one's own heritage', nor embracing the civilization or the modernity of the 'master'. It means appropriating the very semiotic production of difference, hence the whole 'language' in which these differences can be enunciated in the first place.

Under the colonial regime, the radio, Fanon explains, was, a distinctive mark of the French bourgeoisie : ninety-five percent of the radios belonged to the Europeans.[119] Emblematic of the colonisers' precious link to the metropole and to civilisation, the radio was rejected by Algerians as a symbol of the French occupation. From 1945 onwards, however, after the creation of independent radio channels in Syria, Egypt and Lebanon, but also because the Setif tragedy had 'suddenly brought Algeria onto the world-stage', a number of Algerian families started to own radios.[120] As a way of keeping with the pace of events, of feeling and hearing the impact of the independence fighters' actions, more and more families were compelled to utilize this new technology, and 'enter into the vast network of information.'[121] But the socio-cultural transformation analysed here by Fanon goes beyond the mere appropriation of a new

[118] Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 49; Fanon, *L'an V*, p. 47. Translation modified.
[119] Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, p. 53.
[120] Ibid., p. 58
[121] Ibid.

instrument or technology. For the radio means much more to the revolution than a simple instrument of information: it *constitutes* the nation through the community it mediatizes. This process is accelerated by the FLN's creation, in 1956, of its own radio channel : 'the Voice of Fighting Algeria'.[122] At this point, to possess a radio does not mean to modernize anymore, but to 'enter into communication with the Revolution.'[123]

> Almost magically -but we have seen the concerted and dialectical progression of the new national necessities- the technical instrument of the radio receiver lost its identity as an enemy object. The radio set was no longer a part of the occupier's arsenal of cultural oppression. In making of the radio a primary means of resisting the increasingly overwhelming psychological and military pressures of the occupant, Algerian society, by an *autonomous internal movement*, decided to embrace (*assumer*) the new technique and thus tune itself in on the new signalling systems brought into being by the Revolution.[124]

The radio is not a simple communication instrument, it is the terrain of a veritable politics of speech. Forbidden by the colonial state, the radio channel cristallizes collective hopes: 'The radio of the Mujahideen speaks the Words of struggling Algeria and is the Voice of each Algerian. Its almost ghostly character confers on the combat its greatest reality […] Every Algerian, for his part, broadcasts and transmits the new language.'[125] What was initially a social marker is reappropriated in the situation of decolonisation; loosing its first meaning it can be freely re-signified as an instrument of social transformation. The radio functions as an allegorical device of Fanon's narrative by being both a signifier, a mark of belonging and a means or *medium*. For him, the appropriation of the radio is also the appropriation of a unified Voice, which is at once a medium of socialization and a space of narrativization of the revolution itself. As its programmes alternate between Arabic, French and Berber languages, the Voice of fighting Algeria 'unifies the experience and gives it a universal dimension.'[126] The transformation of communication in wartime liberates languages from their communitarian dimensions. Taking this logic of deracialization to its extremes, it is French language itself, Fanon argues, which ends up liberating itself from its colonial meaning:

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[122] Ibid., p. 66.
[123] Ibid., p. 67.
[124] Ibid., p. 84. Translation modified.
[125] Ibid., pp. 70-71. Translation modified.
[126] Ibid., p. 73.

> The French language lost its accursed character, revealing itself to be capable also of transmitting, for the benefit of the nation, the messages of truth that the latter awaited. Paradoxical as it may appear, it is the Algerian Revolution, it is the struggle of the Algerian people that is facilitating the spreading of the French language in the nation.[127]

This appropriation, Fanon underlines in a footnote, is not a case of 'ambivalence', but rather a 'mutation, a radical change of valence', a 'dialectical overcoming'.[128] The quandary facing Fanon is to think the 'expulsion' of the French as foreign body, as occupiers, whilst thinking the move to an authentic inhabitation of language, one that 'opens' worlds. The intellectual liberation of the colonised is a reappropriation of language as a whole, in its general quality as a medium of experience: decolonising French would mean appropriating the totality of mediations that language symbolizes. In the course of his narrative, Fanon has deliberately blurred the distinction between technical and epistemological instruments. To use the French language is at the same time being 'permeated with a certain order of the occupier' and interfering with it, even to the point of relativizing the way the colonisers perceive their own language.[129] In Deleuze and Guattari's words, compositions of 'order-words' (*mots d'ordre*) have thus 'transformed into compositions of passages.'[130] Through the narrative of these social, cultural and symbolic transformations, what Fanon is discussing is less the individual trajectories of particular *forms* (which operate as structures for his narrative) than a general transmutation of the reference system, where the 'dialecticization' of the hegemonic language makes possible a pluralisation of available epistemic resources.[131] Such a pluralisation means at once the possibility of an authentic reciprocity between these epistemic resources and their translatability into one another. Here, language is not a cohesive and harmonious whole but a field of conflicted unities of reference. The weight (i.e. the burden) of cultural designations is thereby divided amongst localized mutations of meanings, modifying its structure from within. In this move, as Fanon argues, language progressively emancipates itself from 'culture' and regains its effectiveness as a conveyer of truth. What this narrative encapsulates is that there is no

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[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid., note 10, p. 73 .Translation modified.

[129] Ibid., p. 76.

[130] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 2005), p. 110.

[131] 'Under these conditions, having a receiver was neither making oneself available to the enemy, nor giving him a voice, nor yielding on a point of principle. On the contrary, on the strict level of news, it was showing the desire to take distance, to hear other voices, to open up new perspectives.' Ibid., p. 79. Translation modified.

ultimately correct passage, there can be no appropriation of Western philosophy, knowledge and techniques that is not an *inside passage*.

Translation as Immanent Critique

To what extent can this narrative of socio-cultural and political emancipation, this conquest of a unified voice, be taken as an allegory of epistemic decolonisation more generally? How do the operations of translation feature in Fanon's critique of the West? According to Matthieu Renault, a parallel can be drawn between Fanon's theory of the relationship between the colonised and Western 'truths', on the one hand, and Fanon's own relation to Western philosophy on the other.[132] The interplay of interruptions and continuities within the sociocultural semiotic field would function as a model for the thinking of epistemological decolonisation at the level of theory. The question of language is pivotal in this move, for Négritude's model of a language turned against itself, reclaimed from within, constitutes a singular model of immanent critique. As Sartre had famously claimed, 'To the ruse of the colonist, they answer by an inverse and similar ruse; since the oppressor is present even in the language they speak, they will speak this language to destroy it.'[133] If Fanon takes up this critical model, he also overcomes and generalises it, by shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, or from the figure of the colonised intellectual to the struggle for national independence. Whilst *Black Skin White Masks* concludes with the impasses of what could only remain an existential revolt, *Wretched of the Earth* thematizes the necessity of an organic integration of the intellectual into the war for independence. What Fanon does retain in the model of the Négritude poet's embrace (*corps-à-corps*) with language, however, are the methods through which theoretical (mis)appropriation can be used as a complex strategy of *détournement*.

Fanon's theoretical strategy can indeed be considered to function through series of inversions of the psychoanalytical and philosophical corpus, which are transposed *from within*. Canonical texts are 'turned round', in Spivak's words, in so far as their grid of analysis, their epistemic perspective, is either shifted or inverted. Fanon's approach to Hegel is paradigmatic of this method of reading that Spivak proposes to designate as

[132] Renault, *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, p. 207.
[133] Sartre, 'Black Orpheus', p. 26.

'abuse'. Fanon does not only quote and comment on Hegel's *Phenomenology*, he also stages this confrontation as part of his own narrative: not only does Fanon 'make a case' for the Black consciousness in Hegel's narrative, but the black consciousness (the 'I' function in *Black Skin White Masks*) also encounters 'Hegel', 'Adler' or 'Césaire', as, authoritative references on its path. According to Spivak, Fanon 'appropriates and claims the Hegelian text so that the Subject in Hegel is what Fanon inhabits, in order to turn the text round. Fanon is reading, not just giving a commentary on Hegel.'[134] He reclaims what Spivak describes as Hegel's 'epistemography': 'a picture of the Subject moving, a philosophical principle on the move.'[135] In this case, 'reading' means entering the slave's perspective, locating oneself 'at a determinate moment of the journey of black consciousness'.[136] By reintroducing a 'historical'[137] figure of the slave within Hegel's lordship and bondage narrative, Fanon *claims* the text from within, interrupting and diverting its dialectical course. For Spivak, Fanon's way of 'entering and using' Hegel is a perfect example of 'affirmative sabotage,'[138] of '"claiming the text" by entering its protocols.'[139] Such translation or displacement is not the accidental 'travelling' of a text beyond the bounds of its original context of apparition, it is always the result of a *necessary appropriation*. The boundary that must be crossed is not the relatively peaceful limit between two natural languages but that of the implicit normativity and address of a given text, from which the future translator and interpreter needs to *carve out* his or her perspective. The surfacing of an 'imagined and (im)possible perspective'[140] transforms, little by little, the entire theoretical edifice.

As Balibar has shown, 'claiming from within' also proved crucial to Fanon's critique of European humanism. In 'Universalité bourgeoise et différences anthropologiques'

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[134] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Readings* (London, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2014), p. 31.

[135] Ibid., p. 41. Spivak had already defined *epistemograph* as 'a graduated diagram of the coming-into-being of knowledge' in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*: *Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 41.

[136] Renault, *Frantz Fanon : De l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, p. 59.

[137] Fanon's revoking of any agency from the part of the 'slaves' in their emancipation is a mark of his blatant lack of historical reflection when he wrote *Black Skin White Masks*, and in particular, of the Haitian revolution. Fanon seems to be generalising from what he holds as the history of Martinique. His narrative echoes Patrick Chamoiseau's (fictional) account of the slave's emancipation in Martinique, which also stresses its disembodied, impalpable character as a 'gift' from the French imperial state rather than a truly transformative experience for the slave population. Cf: Patrick Chamoiseau, *Texaco: A Novel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

[138] Spivak, *Readings*, p. 49.

[139] Ibid., p. 36.

[140] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* p. 9.

(2011) Balibar examines Fanon's interruptive strategy at the level of his rhetorical and philosophical uses of the term 'man'. Analysing the declarative (quasi performative) sentences at the beginning and the end of *Black Skin White Masks,* Balibar argues that Fanon's 'voice' makes itself heard by interrupting the discourse of bourgeois citizenship. At stake here is not how Fanon appropriates specific discourses but rather how he appropriates the universality contained in the name 'man'. Fanon's rhetorical strategy consists in stressing what Balibar calls the 'synecdoche of the universal':[141] in so far as 'Man' means 'white', since a part of humanity represents the universal, the 'black man' is implicitly ex-propriated from humanity. '*Black* man' thus functions as an obstacle to the pseudo universality of Man, an obstacle which does not involve its 'arbitrary limitation' but its simultaneous contradiction and realization.[142] According to Balibar, Fanon's voice 'does not speak about difference to define, justify or combat it, it speaks in difference (or from difference) of the contradiction that it induces.'[143] It speaks *about* universality *from* difference rather than addressing difference *from* a 'universal standpoint', as did the UNESCO's *Declarations on Race*. Manifesting the impossibility of a 'universal institution of the universal,'[144] Fanon's voice thereby suspends what he elsewhere proposed to resolve through a messianic teleology, opening up an essentially proleptic universality – one which only exists in a futural mode. In both cases, the epistemic subject, or the 'voice', is located outside of a historical narrative, the course of which it is trying to modify. But 'claiming the text from within', or claiming the name 'man' also means seeking to be *heard*. On this account, the strength of Fanon's critique stems from its immanent positioning within Western humanism, from working through its internal contradictions.

The widely debated conclusion of *Wretched of the Earth*, however, marks a more radical step in Fanon's reflections on epistemic decolonisation. Whilst it can be routinely interpreted as his radical 'break from Europe', a closer reading of these pages reveals Fanon's concern with the reliance on Europe as a 'model' and especially as a mirroring Other. Fanon seems to be suggesting that a complete change of register, i.e. a translation of language *as a whole*, constitutes the only possibility of a definitive interruption of European symbolic hegemony. In order to become effective, the critique

[141] Etienne Balibar, 'Universalité bourgeoise et différences anthropologiques', p. 480.
[142] Ibid., p. 512.
[143] Ibid., p. 485.
[144] Etienne Balibar, 'Sub Specie Universitatis', *Topoi* 25 no. 1–2 (2006) p. 12.

of Europe could not limit itself to pointing out the inconsistencies of the West and the self-contradictory character of its 'civilization', it also had to reach that point of 'non-communicability' by producing entirely new conditions of intelligibility. There is therefore a tension between Fanon's *de facto* practice of theoretical *détournement*, his translation (or deconstruction) of Western 'truths' and his search for a radical exteriority to Europe at a meta-theoretical level. In this concluding chapter, Fanon locates the epistemic problem posed to (post-)colonial societies within a broader world-historical narrative: the productive *sublation* of the West by the Third World. He thereby projects into the future those societies that had been (anthropologically and historically) 'fixed' in the past. Fanon asserts,

> All the elements for a solution to the major problems of humanity existed at one time or another in European thought. But the Europeans did not act on the mission that was designated to them and which consisted of virulently pondering these elements, modifying their configuration, their being, of changing them and finally taking the problem of man to an infinitely higher plane.[145]

In *Wretched of the Earth*, the logic of the manifesto takes over the proliferation of narrative voices that characterized *Black Skin White Masks*, installing the 'we, wretched of the earth' at the forward-moving centre of the book.[146] The logic at work here is that of a dialectical overcoming of Europe by the Third World. Reading Fanon as the beholder of a *translational* epistemology, then, requires us to suspend this world-historic *telos* and to reinterpret it in a postcolonial universe.[147]

If Fanon's works lend themselves to particularly heated polemics around 'decolonial epistemologies'[148] and their future, it is because Fanon *problematized* more than offered solutions to the question of the possible political and epistemological re-invention of the Third World. He addressed the question of the 'gifts of colonisation' by

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[145] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005), p. 303.

[146] On the manifesto form, see Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 67-75. At the same time, Fanon uses the *Communist Manifesto* as a backdrop, as a text to which his own can be compared. Arguably, the 'Wretched of the Earth' functions as a general meta-discourse for Fanon's narrative, which performatively contradicts the universality of the subject of Western Marxism.

[147] David Marriott has aptly analysed the debates in recent scholarship around Fanon's eschatological teleology in 'Whither Fanon?', *Textual Practice*, 25 (2011), pp. 33–69.

[148] For an overview of the 'decolonial' position, see Walter Mignolo's 'Delinking', Cultural Studies 21, no. 2 (2007), pp. 449-514 and *The Idea of Latin America* (New York: Wiley, 2005).

reinscribing the multiplicity of mediations at stake in their 'transfer'. Like a patient who, under analysis lays out under her eyes the intricate nexus of the determinations of her self-constitution, Fanon's task was to render explicit the relational arsenal of the colonial situation as a structure to confront, but also as a series of 'complexes' to 'deal with' or undertake (*assumer*). Indeed, Fanon often refers to the language and culture brought about through colonisation as something that one must first '*assumer*', take forward. To the forced symmetry of 'cultural dialogue', Fanon responds with the absolute asymmetry between an illusory localism and 'European truths'. Such an asymmetry, he claimed, would only be overcome through the forging of entirely new paths into past 'truths' and knowledge.

CHAPTER II

Translation after Deconstruction:
Mediations and Limits of the Philosophical

Our reading of Fanon's works leads us to a number of questions related to the becoming of philosophy in globalization, but also of its future, after, or in spite of, the critique of European hegemony. As Balibar has pointed out, this question is made especially difficult by the 'trope of self-legitimation,' which philosophy introduces through its claim to universality. 'The difficulty is that we cannot ask ourselves, without circularity, [...] whether or not 'philosophy' or 'philosophies' exist outside of 'Western culture'.[1] Whilst, over the last decade, translation has increasingly imposed itself as one of the most fruitful ways of rethinking the problem of universality, most of these propositions have relied on a notion of translation as a form of articulation, or congregation, of 'differences',[2] leaving aside the effective or existing production of theoretical generalities and philosophies *already* generated through the process of globalization of knowledge and cultural forms. Taking account of such effectivity would be to move from an idea of philosophy as *vector* or instrument of intercultural communication, to one of philosophy as *produced by* intercultural communications and its relations of forces. Such space would not be encompassing or 'subsumptive' but translational; it would be considered the result of translation processes. The point is to think about the way in which reflecting on philosophy's internal mediations takes effect on its generality as discourse. Is it possible to 'redeem' the Western philosophical project through the concept and operations of translation?

To begin addressing this question, we move forward in time, from the post-war to the structural/poststructural moment, reaching our problem from another end: whilst the last chapter problematized translation from the standpoint of the philosophy of culture, this chapter traces the ways in which the question of cultural practice has been reformulated through the prism of *philosophical translation*. As so-called

[1] Etienne Balibar, 'Sub Specie Universitatis', *Topoi* 25 no. 1–2 (2006), p. 5.

[2] See: Giacomo Marramao, *The Passage West: Philosophy After the Age of the Nation State*, (London and New York: Verso, 2012); Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *L'encre des savants : Réflexions sur la philosophie en Afrique* (Paris and Dakar: Editions Présence Africaine, 2013).

'poststructuralism' generalised itself throughout the humanities, Derrida's reflection pertaining to *the translation of philosophical language*, itself 'activated' within and outside philosophy, has proven to be an access point to broader historico-cultural and geopolitical problematics. With Derrida, translation became at once a meta-philosophical operator and an intra-philosophical operation; it became the symptom of the critical reflexivity of philosophy upon itself. Starting from the Derridian problematization of philosophical language, this chapter will mark different moments of its re-elaboration in the design of a deconstructive cultural politics (Spivak), the construction of a translational history of philosophy (*Dictionary of untranslatables*) and the development of a 'postnational' epistemology of cultural processes (cultural translation and travelling theory). In each of these cases, translation is considered as an effective mediation at the level of the formation of theoretical language. This trajectory will highlight some of the tensions inherent to the generalisation of translation as method. Insofar as the issue of translation arises when the validity of generalisation or universalization is in crisis, what happens when translation is itself generalised?

1. Idiomaticity

Derrida, the 'Passage to Philosophy'

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, the question of translation as a theoretical practice of designification and resignification has been exemplarily instantiated by the American reception of 'French theory,' and of Derrida's works in particular. Indeed, deconstruction both encapsulates a certain conception of translation and constitutes a paradigmatic case study of 'travelling theory' in the globalization of academic knowledge. François Cusset takes Spivak's translation and lengthy 1976 introduction of *On Grammatology* as a fundamental event in this process of formation of a 'world theory' (*théorie-monde*).[3] In her introduction to *On Grammatoloy*, Cusset notes, Spivak ascribed deconstruction a much more preeminent role than the one it actually had in Derrida's book. 'By placing the emphasis on "writing" as "difference", in the sense of a

[3] Francois Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 109.

deferral and a self-differing, and on the threat that would thereby weigh on the very possibility of a general law, Spivak not only sketches out the major stakes of deconstruction but *completes* the work begun by Derrida in 1966.'[4] How are we to understand this completion,[5] and how is it articulated to the postcolonial critical programme? In what follows, I thematize this connexion through the problem of translation, which is crucial, albeit in different ways, to both Derrida's and Spivak's works.

The problem of translation occupies a central place in Derrida's philosophy as a whole. From its inception, the issue of translation was crucial to a project that problematized philosophical discourse as a quest for univocity and mastery over sense. As early as his 1962 introduction to Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry ', Derrida laid the groundwork for his theory of language by drawing upon Husserl's assumption of truth's univocity and the possibility of its 'transport' in time through reactivations. As he wrote in this introduction, for Husserl 'univocity is the condition that allows communication among generations […] and assures the exactitude of translation and the purity of tradition.'[6] This led Derrida to distinguish between two opposite conceptions of language, which, functioning as two *limit-concepts*, would not only inform his understanding of the difference between speech and writing, but also between two concepts of translatability. The first would be, Derrida proposes, a Joycean language, a language that would 'take responsibility for all equivocation':

> […] like Joyce, this endeavor would try to make the structural unity of all empirical culture appear in the generalized equivocation of a writing that, no longer translating one language into another on the basis of their common cores of sense, circulates throughout all languages at once, accumulates their

[4] Ibid., p. 110. Emphasis added.

[5] Derrida was interested in the 'afterlife' of his work in different contexts, starting with the very translation of the word 'deconstruction': '[…] one should not begin by naïvely believing that the word 'deconstruction' corresponds in French to some clear and univocal meaning. There is already in 'my' language a serious *[sombre]* problem of translation between what here or there can be envisaged for the word and the usage itself, the reserves of the word. And it is already clear that even in French, things change from one context to another. More so in the German, English, and especially American contexts, where the *same* word is already attached to very different connotations, inflections, and emotional or affective values. Their analysis would be interesting and warrants a study of its own.' Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume II*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), p. 1.

[6] Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leaveay (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), pp. 101-2.

> energies, actualizes their most secret consonances, discloses their furthermost common horizons, cultivates their associative syntheses instead of avoiding them, and rediscovers the poetic value of passivity. In short, rather than put it out of play with quotation marks, rather than 'reduce' it, this writing resolutely settles itself within the labyrinthian field of culture 'bound' by its own equivocations, in order to travel through and explore the vastest possible historical distance that is now at all possible.[7]

The second conception of language that Derrida explores is that which foregrounded Husserl's project of a 'transcendental history': the possibility of a *univocal* and *integrally translatable* language in all its reactivation, the possibility of an infinite iteration as repetition. Throughout his life, Derrida (likewise, we will see in the second part, Michel Serres) consistently problematized meaning as a mediating position between absolute translatability and absolute untranslatability: the problem of meaning, be it philosophical or linguistic is above all framed as a limit, as a cusp that is always threatened by dissolution. As Derrida writes in 'Living On'/Borderlines, 'A text lives only if it lives on (*sur-vit*), and it lives on only if it is at once translatable and untranslatable […] Totally translatable, it disappears as a text, as writing, as a body of language (*langue*). Totally untranslatable, even within what is believed to be one language, it dies immediately. '[8] Furthermore, by opposing this Joycian conception of 'writing' to the Husserlian 'tradition of truth,' this text marks the emergence of a reflection about the relationship between philosophy and translation, a question that he would more directly address in *Dissemination* (1972).

In 'Plato's Pharmacy ', Derrida discusses the *Phaedrus* by drawing attention to Socrates' enigmatic comparison of the book that Phaedrus is holding in his hands with a 'drug' (*Pharmakon)*. 'Pharmakon', Derrida explains, 'can equally be translated by 'remedy' and 'poison' and thus introduces a fundamental '"ambivalence" in the body of discourse.'[9] The play on this e(qui)vocation, Derrida explains, suggests that for Socrates, the 'book, dead and rigid knowledge […] is as foreign to living knowledge and dialectic as the pharmakon is foreign to medical science. And myth to knowledge.'[10] The equivocal character of the term *Pharmakon* is the very sign of this foreignness and uncertainty.

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[7] Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, pp. 102-3.
[8] Derrida, quoted in Kathleen Davis, *Deconstruction and Translation* (Manchester and Northampton: Routledge, 2001), p. 22.
[9] Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 70.
[10] Ibid., p. 73.

What lies behind the polysemy of this single term is the larger problem of philosophical language:

> It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable not only by the imprudence or empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoutable, irreducible difficulty of translation. It is a difficulty inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already in the tradition, as we shall see, from Greek to Greek, and violent, from a nonphilosopheme to a philosopheme. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the passage to philosophy.[11]

Here, Derrida plays on the equivocity of the word 'tradition' itself, which, aside from its habitual meaning (*traditio*), connotates the action of giving somebody to the enemy, a treacherous delivery (*traditum*). He recovers the violence of a gesture, which he attaches to the very emergence of a philosophical language. For Derrida, the assertion of the superiority of speech over writing opens up the 'tradition of philosophy' by ensuring the universal translatability of this opposition and hierarchy.[12] The difficulty of translating 'Pharmakon' is taken as symptom of this other, always-already sealed translation,[13] which signs the 'birth contract' of philosophy. The 'passage to philosophy' is therefore indifferently the problem of the *translatability of philosophical discourse*, and that of the *origin,* or *condition,* of philosophy.

Associating Heidegger's with Husserl's reflections on the origin of philosophy, Derrida's deconstruction does not only entail a radical questioning of the idiom of the philosophical *qua* Western metaphysics (i.e. *qua* the translatability thesis), but also a

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[11] Ibid., p. 72. Translation modified.

[12] Marc Crépon, 'Déconstruction et traduction. Le passage à la philosophie', in *Derrida, La Tradition de La Philosophie*, ed. by Marc Crépon and Frédéric Worms (Paris: Galilée, 2008), p. 33.

[13] 'Translation can do everything except mark this linguistic difference inscribed in language, this difference of language systems inscribed in a single tongue. At best, it can get everything across except this: the fact that there are, in one linguistic system, perhaps several languages or tongues. […] There is impurity in every language. This fact would in some way have to threaten every linguistic system's integrity, which is presumed by each of Jakobson's concepts. Each of these three concepts (intralingual translation, interlingual or translation "properly speaking," and intersemiotic translation) presumes the existence of one language and of one translation in the literal sense, that is, as the passage from one language into another. Si if the unity of the linguistic system is not a sure thing, all of this conceptualization around translation (in the so-called proper sense of translation) is threatened.' Derrida, *The Ear of the Other, Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avita Ronnell, ed Christie MacDonald (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 100.

reflection on the conditions by which a case or situation imposes itself as a universal or a rule. 'Another passage to philosophy' involves a dual procedure. It entails both experimenting with a radically untranslatable idiom *and* exploring forms of historical translatability or transmissibility. Although paying attention to the historicity of a given form, being attuned to its 'idiomaticity', is a way of securing its singularity and *closing it off to translation*, it is also *the only way it can be passed on* or transmitted. For Derrida, this is one of the fundamental aporias of the philosophical as discourse.[14] More than any other philosophical term, deconstruction embodied this aporetic positioning *vis-à-vis* the philosophical tradition, at once interior and exterior to it. As Derrida famously explained to Henri Ronse in 1967:

> To 'deconstruct' philosophy, thus, would be to think -in the most faithful, interior way- the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine -from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy- what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this somewhere motivated repression. By means of this simultaneously faithful and violent circulation between the inside and the outside of philosophy -that is of the West- there is produced a certain textual work that gives great pleasure. That is, a writing interested in itself which also enables us to read philosophemes – and consequently all the texts of our culture – as kinds of symptoms [...] of something that could not be presented in the history of philosophy, and which, moreover, is nowhere present, since all of this concerns putting into question the major determination of the meaning of Being as presence, the determination in which in which Heidegger recognized the destiny of philosophy.[15]

The project 'inherent to the passage to philosophy' -the project of Western metaphysics-[16] is thus countered by the deconstructive project as a 'counter-project of translation'. But as Crépon notes, translation without the possibility of equivalence that the 'transcendental signified' constituted, i.e. translation as *transformation*, needs necessarily to be accompanied by a reflection on the diversity of languages. It calls forth a reconsideration of the political, historical and cultural constitution of philosophical idioms, a reflection which would take various forms in Derrida's subsequent works.

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[14] Jacques Derrida, 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism (Prolegomena to Hypothesis)', *Oxford Literary Review* 14 (1992), p. 4.

[15] Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 6-7.

[16] Here Derrida follows Heidegger by defining philosophy *as* Western metaphysics. Philosophical discourse is thereby doubly homogenised, both as a project and as geo-historical entity.

Deconstruction and Decolonisation

Du droit à la philosophie (1990), a collection of essays titled after one of Derrida's seminars, delineates this 'other passage to' philosophy, starting from the notion of *right to philosophy*. The pivot of this expression, writes Derrida, is the preposition 'to' (*à*), in so far as it denotes an 'articulation', a 'relation' (*rapport à*). What Derrida seeks to problematize through it is the notion of a guaranteed access: 'One says 'to have the right to' to indicate the access guaranteed by the law, the right of way, the passage, the *Shibboleth*, the authorized entry. Who has the right to philosophy today, in our society?'[17] Whilst Derrida's reflections were connected to his involvement with the *GREPH*, and then the foundation of the *College International de Philosophie* (1983), which inquired into the politics of philosophy and the future of philosophy teaching in France, they also occasionally expanded towards broader considerations on the geopolitics of philosophy. Writing for an international conference held in 1978 in Cotonou (Benin) on 'philosophy and the development of sciences in Africa', Derrida addressed the question of the relation (*rapport*) to the philosophical in recently de-colonised African societies. He drew an explicit link between deconstruction and decolonisation, thereby joining, perhaps for the first time, a reflection on philosophy in and after decolonisation together with the 'politics of philosophy'[18] in France.

> At a time when [the] different European philosophical traditions are being worked over by these deconstructive shakings – which are not the end or the death of philosophy- at this very moment, on this continent that *is called* Africa, peoples, nations, and states have to define *practically* […] a new relation to the philosophical. These peoples, nations, and States [...] must define this new relation [rapport] to the philosophical, in the aftermath of various types of decolonization, even within the very process of a decolonization that is under way. What would follow here if the concept of decolonization and, firstly, of colonization could have a radical meaning? That this new relation to the philosophical, in order to be neither colonized nor neo-colonized, should not import either the self-repetition of Occidental philosophy or even its crisis or its "models" of crisis, not even its values of property and reappropriation, which have sometimes imposed their strategic necessity on liberation and decolonization movements. The very idea of importation or the opposed motif of non-importation belongs to the same logic. Hence the extraordinary – theoretical

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy? : Right to Philosophy 1*, trans. Jan Plug (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 3. Translation modified.

[18] One of the essays of *Du droit à la philosophie* was first published in an anthology compiling essays by Châtelet, Foucault, Lyotard, Serres and Derrida, evocatively titled 'Politiques de la philosophie', and presented as a response to the 1968 events. Dominique Grisoni (ed.) *Politiques de la philosophie* (Paris : Bernard Grasset, 1976).

> and practico-political – difficulty : *how to do something more and other than overturn and (thus) reappropriate ? This – more than critical – difficulty is common to the movements of both deconstruction and decolonization.*[19]

What would a practical deconstruction look like? How can we understand the relationship to the philosophical in postcolonial societies outside of the category of 'importation' and the inverse theme of 'non-importation'? In opposition to the *locus classicus*, popularized by Sartre, of appropriation through reversal, Derrida suggests that there might be another possible path. This is, Derrida suggests, at once a 'movement' of thought, a way of thinking, and a practical-political endeavour. For Derrida, it involves a historical and theoretical strategy at the level of philosophical language. What does it mean to take a strategic distance to a language? How to introduce a chasm while remaining in the surroundings of this discourse, hence in a *commensurate* distance to it?

The analogy that is drawn here by Derrida between decolonisation and deconstruction is quintessentially French and francophone. The parallel between the imperialism of (philosophical) language and colonialism is particularly effective because of the French assimilationist policy; this association even defines, for Derrida, the 'colonising principle in general'. Indeed, a distinctive feature of French imperialism was indeed to concentrate a considerable amount of its legitimizing power in the so-called 'civilizing mission'. As in the metropole, French education functioned as Republican symbol and as principle of unification throughout the French imperial state.[20] As indicated above, if

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[19] Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?: Right to Philosophy 1*, pp. 102-3. Translation modified and emphasis added.

[20] This French specificity has constituted a lasting matter of interrogation and conflict, not only between different generations of anticolonial activists, but also between the francophones and their anglophones counterparts. In this respect, CLR James' narrative of his encounter with Aimé Césaire, reproduced in Cédric Robinson' *Black Marxism*, is telling : 'Césaire and I were talking one day, and I asked him : "Where do you come from?" He said, "Well I grew up in Martinique [and went to] the Victor Schoelscher school" … So I said : "What did you do there ?" He told me: "Latin and Greek and French literature". And I said : "What next ?" He said, "I went to France, and I went to the ecole Normale Supérieure". And I said. "Yes I know that school. It is famous for producing scholars and communists." [….] And I said : "What did you do there ?" And he said : "Latin and Greek and French literature". And then I said : "Where did you go from there ?" And he said : "I went to the Sorbonne." And I said, "I suppose you did there Latin and Greek and French literature ?" And he said : "Exactly". He said, "But there is one thing more […] I went to the Victor Schoelscher school, and there I taught Latin and Greek and French literature." So when Césaire wrote his tremendous attack upon Western civilization, in *Return to My Native Land*, […] he was able to make this ferocious attack upon Western civilization because he knew it inside out … He had spent some twenty years studying it.' CLR James,

Fanon's critique of the colonising West can be fruitfully thematized as a deconstructive gesture it is because he considered that French language and Western thought formed an inescapable medium of analysis and self-understanding. As such, it could only be subverted from within, through a critical relation that is at once immanent and transcendent.[21] On Derrida's account, French language survives its decolonisation like 'philosophy' survives its deconstruction: 'If, like philosophy and the deconstruction of the philosophical, decolonisation is interminable,' writes Derrida, 'it is because it cannot be effective either as a simple mode of reappropriation or as a simple mode of opposition or overturning.'[22]

For Derrida, this matter cannot be *simple* because it pertains to the very structure of the philosophical, the power it draws from perpetuating itself through the paradoxical transmission of a certain 'crisis', from the *combined* force of *self-critique* and *teaching* or *education* (*paideia*):

> Philosophy would repeat itself and would reproduce its own tradition as the teaching of its own crisis and as the *paideia* of self-critique in general. This *paideia* always goes hand in hand, and there is nothing fortuitous about this, with what I will call, without taking it lightly, an *imperialist* self-confidence of philosophy. Philosophy is an ontology and its *paideia* an encyclopedia. It has the right to define and situate all the regions of beings or objectivity. It has no particular object proper because it legislates on objectivity in general. It dominates, in a precisely critical fashion, all the so-called regional sciences, assigning them their limits and legitimacy. Dominating the field of the so-called regional disciplines and sciences, cultivating it and marking its property lines, the philosophical onto-encyclopedia is at home everywhere, and its self-critical movement is merely the reproduction of its own authority.[23]

If philosophy constitutes itself though the double movements of *paideia* and imperialism, a simultaneous *ground-taking* and *law-making* and constant delimitation of itself; its capacity of self-delimitation becomes the very *motor* of its expansion. The paradox of the 'tradition of philosophy' would thus reside in its self-critical character,

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quoted in Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1984), p. 259.

[21] This specific positioning, it must be added, also manifests Fanon's modernism, i.e. his problematic relation to culture as *past* or *tradition*. In this respect, Fanon does not only write for a heterogeneous audience in the Third world, where each 'people' is marked by a different 'pre-colonial' past; he also proposes to think the future as a double negation: of tradition and of the colonial situation.

[22] Derrida, *Who's Afraid of Philosophy?: Right to Philosophy 1*, p. 103.

[23] Ibid., p. 101.

in its capacity of delimitating the field of objectivity itself. The 'coloniality of language' targeted here is not the logic of the signifier but the dynamic core of a movement, a peculiar form of historicity. This is where Derrida is closest to a postcolonial critique of Western hegemony, and yet, Derrida's problematic here remains transcendental. For, on the one hand, philosophy is defined through its capacity of 'self-limitation' and on the other hand, Derrida indicates that the conditions of possibility of a re-mediation of the philosophical can only be achieved through a new gesture of limitation. The singular configuration in which this late 1970s text is entangled proceeds from the contrary exigencies of thinking the political problem of the teaching of philosophy *under (political) threat*, and the critique of the *hegemony* of the philosophical (as threat). Only a rethinking of the *internal mediations* of the philosophical, its 'passages' both material and institutional (as teaching) and formal (as languages) could address both issues at once. However, when rethinking these internal mediations, the 'precarious and enigmatic'[24] unity of the philosophical, Derrida turns to his classical *topos* of the internal plurality of all language, leaving aside, at least for a moment, the material and historical aspects of his reflection :

> Every monolingualism and monologism restores mastery or magistrality. It is by treating each language differently, by grafting languages onto one another, by playing on the multiplicity of languages and on the multiplicity of codes within every linguistic corpus that we can struggle at once against colonization in general, against the colonizing principle in general […], against the domination of language or domination by language. The underlying hypothesis of this statement is that the unity of language is always a vested and manipulated simulacrum. There are always languages in language and the structural rigor of the system of language is at once a positivist dogma of linguistics and a phenomenon that can be found nowhere.[25]

Nationalism and the Structure of the Philosophical

It is only after his first lectures on Benjamin that Derrida would address more directly the question of translation in relation to both history and the politics of philosophy. Through the latter, Derrida encountered the notion of 'survival', as a form of 'life', which resonated and added historicity to his initial considerations on translation as transformation.[26] A few years after his Yale seminar on 'The Task of the Translator' and

[24] Ibid., p. 104.
[25] Ibid., p. 105.
[26] Crépon, 'Déconstruction et traduction. Le passage à la philosophie', p. 40.

on 'Comparative literature and the concept of translation', Derrida started a three-year seminar at the EHESS called 'Nationalism and Philosophical Nationalism ', which took place 1984 until 1987, and was immediately followed by another three-year cycle on the 'politics of friendship ', which would mark Derrida's so-called 'ethical turn'.

In a first session of this seminar, published under the name 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism (Prolegomena to a Hypothesis) ', Derrida frames his inquiry in the double perspective of the critique of philosophy *as* nationality and of that of globalization (*mondialisation*). The effectivity of his critique stems from his articulation of a logic of nationality within the very structure of 'philosophical idiom or translatability.'[27] Derrida indeed argues that the 'national problem' does not have a merely 'extrinsic, accidental or contingent relation' to the philosophical, but an essential one:[28]

> Even before any elaboration of the concept of nation and of philosophical nationality, of idiom as national philosophical idiom, we know at least this much – it's a minimal but indubitable predicate – namely that the affirmation of a nationality of even the claim of nationalism does not happen to philosophy by chance or from the outside, it is essentially and thoroughly philosophical, it is a philosopheme.[29]

Not only does it mean that *nation* as word and concept is philosophical through and through, and not to be conveniently placed in an 'empirical' domain or exterior to the philosophical, but also that the 'structure of national consciousness' implies the positing of the nation 'not only [as] a bearer of a philosophy but of an exemplary philosophy, i.e., one that is both particular and potentially universal – and which is philosophical by this very fact.'[30] Derrida cites Fichte's *Discourses to the German Nation* to describe the philosophical 'structure of nationality', which, functioning through the 'self-positing or self-identification of the nation,'[31] has the form of a circular creativity. It is an 'alliance with onself, with one's own unconscious, with one's originary past. One must contract and renew the alliance which thus shows up as much as a promise or an injunction as it does as a fact.'[32] As we have already seen earlier, the criterion of

[27] Derrida, 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism […]', p. 5.
[28] Ibid., p. 10.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., p. 12.

'Germanity' is essentially linguistic, and German nationalism is essentially philosophical, for it has the form of a 'cosmopolitan' language: it is a universalism.[33]

Thinking the universality of the philosophical together with its geo-political coordinates necessarily entails reflecting on its peculiar logic of generalisation. In this lecture, however, Derrida only lays the ground to a reflection that would become increasingly crucial to present-day philosophy. The dynamics lying beneath the apparent contradiction between an intensification of international exchanges and the 'revival of nationalisms',[34] Derrida admits, is only just perceptible. Although the philosophical task attached to globalization remains unclear, Derrida writes,

> '[…] [W]hat is certain is that today all the so-called professional philosophers feel this question to be inseparable from the stakes of philosophy itself, from the fate, destiny or destination of the philosophical as such, in its heart or its centre. I say they 'feel' this, for it is often a sort of feeling, a sort of motivation which is more or less linked to a discursive elaboration as such, but which is *one of those motivations that make things shift even if they are not taken up by a philosophical project as such*, in the form of philosophy.'[35]

It is no coincidence then that Derrida's reflections on the politics of the teaching of philosophy and his sequence on *nationalism* were followed by one on 'friendship' and *hospitality*. Arguably, these two coordinates were already immanent to the Romantic moment and dialectically structured post-1945 humanism. In fact, the task of thinking another philosophical project in the postcolonial or global moment was not to be taken up by Derrida himself, but gradually came into being through a number of transatlantic translations around his works, themselves building up another way of inhabiting at once the inside and the outside of deconstruction.

Spivak, the Geopolitics of Deconstruction

> In 1981, I found myself in the curious position of being asked to write on deconstruction and on French feminism by two famous U.S. journals, *Critical Inquiry* and *Yale French Studies*, respectively. I cannot now remember why that position had then seemed to me absurd. At any rate, I proposed a translation of Mahaswera's short story 'Draupadi' for *Critical*

[33] Ibid., p. 16.
[34] Ibid., p. 6.
[35] Ibid., p. 9. Emphasis mine.

> *Inquiry*, with the required essay on deconstruction plotted through a reading of the story.[36]

Spivak's counter-move to the rapid 'reterritorialization' of deconstructive methods within the American academy was to propose deconstruction as *strategy*. The wager of her initiative was to perform on deconstruction its own 'moves' and to take up seriously its inherent 'corruptability'.[37] If Spivak can be said to 'complete' Derrida, it is insofar as she made the wilful 'mistake' of supplementing deconstruction with a 'subject' and interpreting it instrumentally. This implied a double displacement of its scope, both disciplinary and political, from philosophy to the Humanities and from European 'national-humanism' to globalization. Through the mediation of Spivak, two different motives of the critique of philosophy meet: the deconstructive gesture, as problematic relation to Western metaphysics and the critique of the Enlightenment by former imperial subjects, at once internal and external to it.

> The Cultural Studies position can be roughly summarized this way: colonizers founded Anthropology in order to know their subjects ; Cultural Studies was founded by the colonized in order to question and correct their masters. Both disciplines study culture, the first the culture of others as static and determining, the second the culture of one's own group – as dynamic and evolving.[38]

Spivak's historicization and 'worlding' of deconstruction involved displacing deconstruction's scope from the text of the philosophical tradition to *culture*, at a period in which new trends in interpretive anthropology (and crossings with so-called poststructuralism) were flourishing. Yet Spivak continuously dissociated herself from anthropology as a disciplinary construct, drawing instead upon the reciprocal alliance between cultural studies and comparative literature.[39] This peculiar positioning manifests Spivak's centering on 'reading' as pivotal to her entire enterprise, as the

[36] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge (MA) & London: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 251.

[37] Rebecca Comay, 'Geopolitics of Translation: Deconstruction in America', *Stanford French Review* 15 (1991), p. 54. Spivak commented on this question on repeated occasions. See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London & New York : Routledge, 2012), p. x.

[38] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 120.

[39] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Deconstruction and Cultural Studies: Arguments for a Deconstructive Cultural Studies', in *Deconstructions. A User's Guide*, ed. Nicholas Royle (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 35.

possibility of articulating deconstruction with a politics of positionality predicated upon a class analysis extended to the 'globe'.

With Spivak, the target of deconstructive critique shifts from the 'history of metaphysics' to the 'history of imperialism', the core of which is a particular economy of knowledge. For Spivak, the 'native informant' names a certain regime of epistemic discontinuity, a void or lack at the centre of the 'axiomatics of imperalism'. At the centre of *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), this transhistorical figure allows Spivak to examine 'the structure of the production of postcolonial reason',[40] through different phases of capitalism and through different disciplinary lenses. Its opening chapter ('Philosophy') travels through the critical tradition ('the last Three Wise Men of the continental (European) tradition': Kant, Hegel, Marx),[41] by means of what Derrida may have described as an 'interested repression'. Highlighting this repression, the 'native informant' is an 'unaknowledgeable moment',[42] a name under erasure: 'I shall docket the encrypting of the name of the "native informant" *as the name of Man - a* name that carries the inaugurating affect of being human [...] I think of the "native informant" as a name for that mark of expulsion from the name of *Man* - a mark crossing out the impossibility of the ethical relation.'[43]

In classical anthropology, the 'native informant' was at once the object of anthropological investigation, and a source of information; the validity of his 'information' being measured according to the possibility of authenticating both himself and his word. 'He (and occasionally she) *is* a blank, though generative of a text of cultural identity that only the West (or a Western-model discipline) could inscribe.'[44] Historically, native informants were mediators, translators of 'their own culture', transcoding it into the idiom of Western science, whilst at the same time being denied any other role than that of providing 'data'. The native informant then crystallizes the very regime of anthropological divide between the 'West' and its 'Others',[45] an epistemic regime of limitations of access into 'humanity'. In other words, the native

[40] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Harvard University Press, 1999), p. xii.
[41] Ibid., p. 111.
[42] Ibid., p. 4.
[43] Ibid., pp. 5-6.
[44] Ibid., p. 6.
[45] See, also: Naoki Sakai, 'Theory and the West'

informant is the necessary counterpart to the inscription of the *norm* of the human as European.

Spivak's analysis of the 'geopolitical differentiation' of the Kantian subject is not grounded, as we may expect, in a critique of his *Anthropology*, but rather relies on what she considers to be a 'forced' anthropological (or 'anthropomorphic') interpretation of passages of the *Critique of Judgement*, associating herself, in this regard, with Schiller's 'misreading' of Kant.[46] The node of her demonstration lies in Kant's conception of a (necessary) programming for freedom as a closed system of priorities, as a propensity to freedom inscribed in nature rather than culture, which does not *depend* on culture yet *requires* it.[47] What is the status of those who are neither considered purely 'natural', and not (yet) 'cultural' or cultivated; neither a natural *telos* nor endowed with a cultural one? Situating this quandary within Kant's developments on teleological reason, in §67 of the *Critique*, Spivak analyses the textual role that a 'casual remark' concerning the 'New Hollanders and the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego' plays in the economy of Kant's argumentation.[48] This example 'uses a peculiar thinking of what man is to put him out of it',[49] just as the access to the sublime excludes the 'raw' Savoyard, for perceiving the infinity of nature as sublime rather than as 'fearful abyss' requires receptivity to culture and practical reason.[50] What supposedly grounds the *universality* of men's aesthetic judgement is thus simultaneously postulated in all men and 'proven' by exclusion of some of them. The ground of this universality is a split in nature itself.

The foreclosure that Spivak identifies in Kant establishes, in broad lines, the framework of her own theoretical endeavour, which she characterized in her most recent collection (*An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012)) as the 'using of the

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[46] The question of Schiller's reading of Kant, as framed by De Man in his 'Schiller and Kant', sets the stage for Spivak's own confrontation with Kant's philosophy, in both *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012). But what remained only obliquely addressed in the first book is directly confronted in the introductory chapter of the second. (See: *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p.4-5 & 15-6; *An Aesthetic Education*, pp. 2-21)

[47] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* p. 12.

[48] Ibid., p. 26.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Benjamin Greenman, 'Meta-Politics and the Deconstruction of Western Aesthetics: Re-Reading Kant's Critique of Judgement according to Rancière and Spivak', in *Sociedades En Crisis. Europa Y El Concepto de Estética* (Madrid: Ministerio de Cultura, 2011), pp. 194–200.

Enlightenment from below',[51] drawing on the double epistemic positioning of the 'postcolonial and the metropolitan migrant' as 'interventional levers'.[52] Spivak remains engaged with the Enlightenment project in so far as she retains the moral perfectibility of the human as a horizon, presenting her intervention as a 'supplementation'. She draws on Schiller in order to inscribe a possibility of 'training of the mind' within the aesthetic dimension of human experience, as a division in nature. Rather than fixing the possibility of the latter in the structure of formation as progressive cultivation (*Bildung*) of the self, she proposes literature, and more pointedly narrative form, as ground, or space of such 'education'. However, the 'real and active determination of the aesthetic'[53] must be sought, not in an idea of art, but in the multiple dimensions of 'reading', which she disclosed throughout her works by confronting deconstruction with her study of literature. For her, 'ab-using' the Enlightenment also means 'bequeathing a geography to it',[54] expanding its cultural and political scope.

Read together, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* and *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* disclose the two axes through which Spivak 'set deconstruction to work' on this other stage, of postcolonial studies and the politics of globalization. With this move, Spivak preserved the most essential determinations of Derrida's early intuitions on deconstruction, as both a form of 'intimate reading' and a 'strategic intervention', paying close attention to the philosophical *idiom* and questioning it from 'a certain exterior […] unnameable by philosophy'. [55] While the strategic operation of *deconstruction* offers Spivak a model for the thinking of a 'politics of reading' as an intervention into the Western mainstream of theory and philosophy, she also turns to Derrida's reflections on *translation* as she attempts to found the (universal) instantiation of the 'ethical'. As she repeatedly writes, 'translation is the most intimate act of reading'. In this endeavour, however, she does not pursue Derrida's own reflections on the fate of philosophy in *mondialisation*, but his later reflections on poetic and literary translation, which can be found in his works from the 1990s.[56] In

[51] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 3.
[52] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 98.
[53] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 20.
[54] Ibid.
[55] See *infra*, p. 51.
[56] See, in particular: Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel' in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, ed. by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University

this period, Derrida arguably brought the task of 'another passage to philosophy' to bear on his earlier reflections on poetry 'as an experience of the impossible', problematizing translation at once as an experience of the impossible *and* as passage to the Other.[57] As a consequence, the fate of philosophy in globalization depended less on its 'geopolitics' than on its capacity to articulate itself to an ethics of hospitality. Whilst Spivak departs from Derrida's own investment in migratory politics through the (quasi-messianic) notion of 'absolute *arrivant'*, she retains from his trajectory the use of the *aporetic* dimension of translation as an experiential or formal core of the ethical relation, pushing it *further* in both philosophical and political terms. Translation is the paradigmatic experience of the impossible, and for this reason, it has a pivotal function within Spivak's theoretical construct. Like Derrida, she takes translation to be the terrain of a certain ethics of alterity, but seeks to link it to a more complex set of historico-political specifications. For Spivak, the questions of linguistic plurality and cultural idiomaticity are directly linked to a set of class concerns that have to do with the transformation of Marxist politics in globalization, that is, with the changing landscape of social stratifications under the impact of migrations and diasporic formations. As she explains in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Derrida's self-identification as a 'Franco-maghreban' has nothing to do, strictly speaking, with the 'postcolonial', but confines him to the concerns of 'an honorable and well-placed Eurocentric economico-cultural migrant'; it belongs to 'migrant activism' but not to 'counter-globalization resistance'.[58] She is even more critical of Deleuze and Foucault, whose critiques of the 'sovereign subject' did nothing to disclose 'geopolitical determinations,' but in fact further concealed them.[59] What transpires from Spivak's criticism is that tropes of the 'minor', like that of the 'arrivant' are predicated upon a kind of 'predatory' conceptual abstraction. They *appeal* to forms of marginalization without *engaging* with the problem at a sufficiently historical or structural level.

Press, 2007), pp. 191-225 and *Monolingualism of the Other: Or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1998).

[57] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', p. 197.

[58] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, note 29, p. 18.

[59] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* p. 248. She continues as follows: 'Ignoring the international division of labor, rendering 'Asia' (and on occasion 'Africa') transparent; reestablishing the legal subject of socialized capital – these are problems as common to much post-structuralist as to 'regular' theory. […] Why should such occlusions be sanctioned in precisely those intellectuals who are our best prophets of heterogeneity and the Other ?' (Ibid., p. 250)

> Fieldwork without transcoding : an alteration perhaps happening to the imagination of a fieldworker rather than a difference claimed by the ethnographer.[60]

For Spivak, countering such systemic process of concealment, this 'epistemic violence', cannot be done through philosophy, nor through another 'epistemology'. For Spivak, one cannot 'know' the other but only *approach*, or *figure* her in the medium of language or literature. Since the 'experience of the other' as 'foreign' is always underwritten by colonialism and imperialism, by the 'tourist-gaze' and orientalism, the only ethical encounter remaining available would be one that will take its very impossibility as the point of departure. Translation is pivotal to her argument as it constitutes an access to the other through her language. Rather than an ethics *of* translation, Spivak develops a theory in which translation figures or prefigures the ethical as such. In 'The Politics of Translation' (1993), she argues that the type of relation to the other that translation constitutes is closer to 'love', or 'eroticism', than to an ethical relation:[61] 'the task of the translator is to surrender herself to the linguistic rhetoricity of the original text'.[62] For Spivak, who writes specifically about literary and poetic translation, and draws on her own experience of translating from her mother tongue (Bengali), 'entering the other's text' consists in grasping the way in which the 'writer writes agency'. Such an agency is located, according to Spivak, in the 'worlding' at stake in the 'jagged relationsip between rhetoric and logic, […] a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world. Unless one can at least construct a model of this for the other language, there is no real translation.'[63]This relationship lies underneath the threshold of the ethical, in the production and reproduction of a certain 'idiomaticity', a relation to one's own language. Arguably, this narrative ability plays in her theory the same role that the 'I-function' plays for Benveniste, by locating the

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[60] Spivak, 'Deconstruction and Cultural Studies', p. 33.

[61] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation' in *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (Routledge, 2012), p. 183.

[62] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 189.

[63] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 181. The presence of the term 'model' here is important, as it indicates the retention of a certain structuralism within Spivak's approach to literature. In 'The Double-Bind Starts to Kick In' she would write: 'This much at least is clear: to imagine or figure the other as another self, you need to engage the moving edge of culture as it leaves its traces in idiom. To reduce it to language – to semiotic systems that are organized as language –was a structuralist dream. But at least, whatever the subject-position of the structuralist investigator, there was rigor in the enterprise.' Spivak, An Aesthetic Education, p. 108.

subject's emergence within its idiomatic agency. Reconstituting this relation, enacting it, translation becomes a space for an (otherwise) impossible ethical relation to take place; it is a practice of literary imagination oriented towards a historically and culturally specific other.

Translation as Subjectivation

Language thus constitutes a zone of friction between the ethical and the epistemological: a space of potential dialogic encounters and 'answer-ability' (responsibility).[64] It is, also, a space where one 'learns to learn', where one trains the 'habits' of the mind. For Spivak, working on this 'text-ile' leads us to an inscription of the cultural itself, which plays out at the 'subindividual level', at the level of individual *subjectivation*. However, Spivak's 'textualization' of culture has less to do with a metaphorical register than with the need to grasp, to *name*, the complex reality of 'power'. In this respect she is close to Foucault, whom she repeatedly quotes: 'one needs to be a nominalist, no doubt: power is not an institution, and it is not a structure; it is not a certain strength (*puissance*) that some are endowed with; it is the name one lends (*prêter*) to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.'[65] In spite of its nominalism, Spivak claims, this definition indicates a discrepancy between a strategic field and an inductive force-field,[66] between 'states of power' and the 'moving base of force relations' (*socle mouvant des rapports de force*) 'which, by their inequality, incessantly *induce* states of power.'[67] It is in this discrepancy, that Spivak introduces a 'subindividual' or 'ontic' dimension, wherein she locates the possibility of ethics.[68] Likewise, 'culture', Spivak claims, is a *prête-nom*, a placeholder for these always-specific strategic situations and, at the same time, it also designates the *idiomatic* and *differential forcefield* from which (cultural) identities emerge.

[64] See: Spivak, 'Responsibility', *Boundary 2* 21 (1994), pp. 19–64.
[65] Michel Foucault, quoted in Gayatri Spivak, 'More on Power/Knowledge', in *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, pp. 28-9.
[66] Spivak, 'More on Power/Knowledge', p. 36.
[67] Ibid., p. 34.
[68] Spivak, 'More on Power/Knowledge', p. 33.

More recently, Spivak turned to Melanie Klein's works to 'establish biology as the terrain of ethical semiosis',[69] thereby developing, beyond the scope of literature, a theory grounded on a generalised concept of translation. In 'Translation as Culture' (2000) Spivak develops a theory of the semiosis of the subject through a translational account of the [subject's] entry into language, inscribing her 'politics of translation' at an even deeper, 'sub-individual', level. Translation designates the enigmatic entry into the Symbolic, or into 'that domain whose doors [...] only open from within'[70] a certain psycho-biological mechanism of 'interiorization' of the 'outside':

> In every possible sense, translation is necessary but impossible [...] The human infant grabs on to some one thing and then things. This grabbing [*begreifen*] of an outside indistinguishable from an inside constitutes an inside, fit to negotiate with an outside, going back and forth and coding everything into a sign-system by the thing(s) grasped. One can call this crude coding a 'translation'. In this never-ending weaving, violence translates into conscience and vice versa. [...] Thus 'nature' passes and repasses into 'culture ', in a work or shuttling site of violence [...]. Translation in this general sense is not under the control of the subject who is translating. Indeed the human subject is something that will have happened as this shuttling translation, echoing inside to outside, from violence to conscience: the production of the ethical subject.[71]

Translation-as-semiosis and translation-as-activity are two crucial elements of Spivak's reconfiguration of the Foucauldian nexus of power and knowledge in the 'global' context. On the one hand the 'politics of translation' designates the ways in which the re-elaboration of an originary semiosis, or what she grasps as 'deep language training', produces a subject that is capable of ethical relations. It is one of the possible meanings of an 'aesthetic education' in the era of globalization. On the other hand, the 'politics of translation' is the second-order coding, the strategic coding of subject-positions, or what counteracts the 'transcoding' of people and communities under globalized capitalism. Strategies of 'ab-use' by 'migrants and postcolonials', such as Fanon's reading of Hegel, constitute a paradigmatic example of such 'politics' of reading 'in the broadest possible sense'. The 'politics of translation' is thus concerned with both the production of subjects and their recoding within cultural politics; it is a technique of

[69] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 18.
[70] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard McCleary (Evanston: Nortwestern University Press, 1964), p. 41.
[71] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education,* pp. 241-2.

reading, the search for idiomatic intimacy and a strategy of re-coding of subject-positions, a theory of 'ab-use' and 'clandestine reading'.[72]

The Receding 'Other'

Reframing the operations of deconstructive philosophy within the realm of culture, Spivak has pushed the internal split of the concept of translation, between 'information' and 'literature', or 'code' and 'knowledge' to their limits. She opens *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* with the following propositions: 'Globalization takes place only in capital and data. Everything else is damage control. Information command has ruined knowing and reading'.[73] Moreover, this split is redoubled, for it plays out both at the level of formal languages and at the level of natural languages. A 'politics of translation' should counter both the 'transcoding of cultures' and the *reductio ad unum* operated by global English, which functions, Spivak surmises, as the 'semiotic as such'. In her drastic move from the philosophical tradition to the 'axiomatic of imperialism', the opposition remains, between two forms of 'languaging' or two regimes of translatability. As she recently put it, 'The human subject in globalization is an *island* of languaging.'[74] In a way that is strikingly close to Berman, the act of translating is therefore split into the 'violence of transcoding' associated to the 'appropriation of the singularity of the other's idiom' and the 'love', or sensual encounter of an authentic translation. This split, however, is itself entirely predicated upon a division of language between a 'generalising instrument' and a 'rhetoric instance'; it repeats the traditional double-bind of the philosophical concept of translation. In Spivak's conflation between Derrida's early and later works, what defined 'philosophical *langue*' is applied to the 'semiotic of capital', and what was considered to be a plurality of 'philosophical idioms', has been historicized into the 'minority languages' of the 'global south'.

There is a rupture, in Spivak's thought, between the critique of 'epistemic violence' and her own theoretical project, thought of as a transdisciplinary theory of reading or a militant form of cultural studies. Whilst translation posits the ethical relation as an

[72] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 200.
[73] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 1.
[74] Spivak, 'More Thoughts on Cultural Translation' *Transversal [online]* (2008): http://eipcp.net/transversal/0608/spivak/en

impossible yet necessary relation, the 'native informant' arguably configures the lineaments of an impossible *theory*, one that is forever marked by the seal of colonialism as 'a past that has not been appropriately mourned,'[75] of a ghostly history that keeps returning. 'This is not a story to pass on' writes Morrison in *Beloved*,[76] telling her history in the form of untranslatability. As Spivak explains,

> Between mother and daughter, a certain historical withholding intervenes […] Here the author represents with violence a certain birth-in-death, a death-in-birth of a story that is not to translate or pass on. Strictly speaking, therefore, an aporia. And yet it is passed on, with the mark of *un*translatability on it, in the bound book, *Beloved*, that we hold in our hands.[77]

Epistemic violence cannot be corrected, or 'sutured', because the subaltern subject cannot be comprehended through 'information', but only approached through an ethical and necessarily imperfect relation. For Spivak, therefore, there cannot be a new 'epistemology', be it intersectional or decolonial, able to *rectify* this epistemic discrepancy, but only a *critique* of postcolonial reason: 'In a mere miming of that figure, one might say that the epistemic story of imperialism is the story of a series of interruptions, a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured. […] [T]oday's cultural studies should think at least twice before acting on a wish to achieve that impossible seam […]'.[78]

Furthermore, this epistemic discontinuity appears foundational to her theoretical project as a whole. The latter is structured upon the opposition between the ideological production of otherness and the ethical relation to the 'other' and by the need to 'supplement' the chasm between the 'historico-political' and the 'ethical' domains.[79] Literature and language-training thus play a redemptory role in the disciplinary economy of Spivak's thought: while narrative imagination constitutes a space of historical re-invention, entering the idiomatic economy of another's language opens up to what Spivak has recently theorised as an 'ethical reflex', which is, at bottom, habit formation as a cognitive operation of 'learning to learn'. What remains highly enigmatic, however, is the status of her own theoretical production. She is torn

[75] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 108.
[76] Ibid., p. 169.
[77] Spivak, 'The Politics of Translation', p. 195.
[78] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 208.
[79] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education,* p. 98.

between the imperatives of generalisation ('essentialization') of her cultural politics and a permanent attention to the singularity of her own 'case' through recourse to autobiography and story-telling. Spivak's 'theory' unfolds around the 'aporia of exemplarity' so pointedly evoked by Derrida.[80] This predicament inscribes a form of circularity within her thinking as the *narrativization* of her philosophical argument holds universalisation in check while playing the role of an exemplary situation. Hence her persistent return to the distinction between the postcolonial migrant and the subaltern woman, and the dissimulation of the subaltern by the postcolonial: 'I had been away from home for twenty years then. I had the courage to acknowledge that there was something predatory about nonresident Indian's obsession with India.'[81] It is not only globalization that increases the complexification of class and permanently out-dates our instruments of analysis, but the transformations in the field of power-knowledge, in which she is entangled, heard and instrumentalized. She is, after all, also this 'native informant' who keeps on being re-written by the axiomatics of imperalism, and who 'collaborates' with the 'transnational agencies of globalization:'[82]

> The diasporic postcolonial [...] identified and welcomed as the agent of an alternative history, may indeed be the site of a chiasmus, the crossing of a double contradiction: the system of production of the national bourgeoisie at home, and, abroad, the tendency to represent neocolonialism by the semiotic of 'internal colonisation'.[83]

Thus, in her attempt to design the role of an 'organic intellectual of globalization' Spivak stumbles against the necessary violence of any 'global' politics led from the perspective of migrant intellectuals from the 'metropoles'. She cannot find her way around the two main schemes of alterity at her disposal, that of the impersonal 'arrivant' or 'host' of Levinasian Derridianism, and that of the 'comfortable "other" for transnational postmodernity, "ground-level activity" [and] "emergent discourses."'[84] Organised around the notion of 'subject as other', or the 'other subject', her theoretical construction is confronted with the limits of deconstruction and the image of a

[80] 'What happens when someone resorts to describing an allegedly uncommon "situation," mine, for example, by testifying to it in terms that go beyond it, in a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental, or ontological?' Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other,* pp. 19-20.
[81] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 251.
[82] Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason,* p. 402.
[83] Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education*, p. 61.
[84] Ibid., p. 62.

perpetually receding subject, impossible and vacant. 'When one decides to speak of double binds and aporias, confesses Spivak, one is haunted by the ghost of the undecidable in every decision.' [85] In Spivak's theoretical configuration, purging globalization of anthropological discourse presents itself as an infinite task of translation, or an infinite *reparation*.[86] Hence the politics of translation, like the politics of reparation, depends on the positing of the incompletable nature of the task as premise.

Shifting deconstruction's scope from philosophy to literature and cultural studies, Spivak ascribes a special centrality to the question of reading. Unlike Derrida's, her theory of reading is organised around complex subject-positions; any text has a historico-political determinacy that cannot be overlooked. As for Derrida, untranslatability, be it literary or cultural, functions as a barrier against the imposition of a violent linguistic regime of 'equivalence'. In this context, the practice of literary translation is an effectuation of the ethical relation. Spivak's politics of translation, then, is traversed by a double movement, towards the historically specific on the one hand, and towards a universal ethical relation, on the other hand. As indicated earlier in this chapter, Derrida considers the problem of translation at once as the sign of an *impossible* passage and as the intimation of *another* passage to philosophy. Spivak's conception of translation partially retrieves this logic, which is now a passage to the 'other': translation is both the locus of an impossible ethical relationship and a space of potential encounter with concrete, historically situated subject-positions. Literary translation is therefore the space of the *effectuation* or exercise of the ethical relation. It is precisely *because* translation is aporetic (impossible yet necessary) that it encapsulates the possibility of an ethical relationship. It is insofar as this seam is unachievable that it constitutes an ethical 'training'. In this context, untranslatability tends to be reified as the very symbol of epistemic rupture. In the next section, I will show that a similar dynamic is at play in the *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, which considers linguistic difference at the same time as the locus of the historically specific, and as a symbol of difference as such.

[85] Ibid., p. 104.
[86] Ibid., p. 247.

2. Historicity

The Dictionary of Untranslatables

> Philosophy did not die in 529 with the closure of the last pagan philosophical school by the Roman emperor of Orient Justinian, it began a long transfer, a long migration (*translatio*), first towards the Muslim Orient, then to the Christian West. In these successive travels in which are shelled the capitals of knowledge and study centres (*studia*) from Athens to Bagdad, from Bagdad to Cordova, from Cordova to Toledo, and from Paris to Oxford, to Cologne or to Prague, *Greek philosophy has, from translation to translation, spoken Arabic and Latin. Some things stayed, many got lost, and others came which were never said*. Unravelling the history of a problem is hence to follow a real epistemic trajectory, to observe the formation of networks, looking at how certain elements are distributed, undone and recomposed; it is to take into account *slidings*, *recurrences*, but also *structural facts* determined by the state of the accessible corpus.[87]

Translation has always been a *de facto* method in philosophy, due to the circulation of knowledge and its material conditions, of which the exemplary case was the *translatio studiorum* - the transfer of the Aristotelian corpus from Ancient Greece to the Latin Middle-Ages.[88] A history of translations is the underside of what Derrida depicted as the 'history of truth' in 'Plato's Pharmacy': a technological, political, linguistic history tied to the circulation of scholars, the transmission of texts and the transformation of institutions. However, given the multiplicity of historical determinations at play at any given time, the contours of such a 'method' can never be fully mapped or drawn, except by focusing on specific *loci*, symptoms, *coupes d'essence*. Such a 'method' can only travel in the negative of the fabrication of 'concepts' in the usual sense. Pointing to the

[87] Alain de Libera, *La querelle des universaux : De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), p. 13. Emphasis mine.

[88] The *translatio studiorum*, structured around consecutive waves of receptions of the Aristotelian corpus, is not an instance but an 'exemplary case' of translation as method. Indeed, because of the structure of the Scholastic curriculum, the history of medieval philosophy is almost entirely enfoldable into the history of the translation of the Aristotelian corpus, and its layered, incomplete, complex translations and receptions, through the mediation of Boetius and Averroes, which gives it a singular cohesion: the coherence of *auctoritates*, copied, repeated, subverted. See, Alain de Libera, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie médiévale*, Que sais-je? (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1989) and *La querelle des universaux : De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

linguistico-historical fabrication of the philosophical idiom and the complexity of its texture is also a way of appreciating that philosophy is, after all, itself a cultural form.[89]

Whereas rethinking philosophy through the prism of its linguistic diversity is often announced in a programmatic form, it has taken effect into the important *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies, un dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, an eleven-year project undertaken by a collective of 150 collaborators under the supervision of Barbara Cassin, first published in 2004. The *Vocabulaire*, presented as a 'work tool' for researchers, is divided into four hundred entries that intertwine semantics, the history of European languages and the philosophical 'moments' that have marked shifts and turns within the history of concepts. Following the Derridian injunction of philosophizing in 'more than one language' (*plus d'une langue*), the *Vocabulaire* reorganises the history of philosophy from the standpoint of *nexus* of equivocity or ambiguity, which function as 'envois', questions and, sometimes, as full-blown problematics in a Bachelardian or Deleuzian sense.[90] I do not have the space here to provide any sort of overall commentary or description of this monumental and, to a large extent, heterogenous project. I instead propose to address the *Vocabulaire* through its implicit and explicit configuration of translation as method, a configuration, which is not merely internal to the practice of philosophy (from a so-called continental point of view), but asserts itself, as we will see, as a politics of philosophy in globalization, through the double lens of French language and of 'Europe' in its historical and political determination.

As Cassin explains, 'To speak of untranslatables in no way implies that the terms in question, or the expressions, the syntactical or grammatical turns, are not and cannot be translated: the untranslatable is rather what one keeps on (not) translating. But this indicates that their translation, into one language or another, creates a problem, to the extent of sometimes generating a neologism or imposing a new meaning on an old

[89] See: Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-19.

[90] Questions of translation become a paradigmatic locus to think the production of problem and their materiality. Without articulating it in terms of 'problematic', Serres, who owed so much to Bachelard, constituted, we will see in chapter IV, his own materialist epistemology via translation. On the genealogy of the 'problematic', see Patrice Maniglier, 'What Is a Problematic?', *Radical Philosophy*, 2012, pp. 21–23.

word.'[91] If an untranslatable is a word that has not, cannot, or should not be translated, it is because untranslatability, as in Derrida's account, primarily denotes an equivocity or internal difference that is often itself *due to* translations and re-translations, disseminations and transfers. As such, untranslatability is an effect of the historical sedimentation of concepts. Conceptual equivocity manifests itself in the problem of translation it poses (in its *wording*), functioning as a 'point of heresy.'[92] It can be occasioned by a conflict of interpretation, a variation on a theme or a singularity. As a consequence, untranslatability is not a linguistic denomination here, but a philosophical one: it is an 'emergence' in so far as it arises from a given philosophical 'field of forces', and can, most of the time, only appear retrospectively, from a *genealogical* standpoint. In the *Vocabulaire*, however, the confusion between the linguistic and the philosophical, the philological and the problematic, is present through and through, due to the imposition of a general frame of heterogeneous historico-philosophical approaches.

Indeed, there is no single logic for the use of the notion of translation across the various entries, each philosopher addressing a specific aspect of translation that has arisen in his or her work. The unit of analysis varies from the sheer importation of a missing word from one language to another (e.g. the introduction of 'entrepreneur' into English at the end of the nineteenth century as a reference to French political economy),[93] to the examination of an entire network of German phenomenal concepts (*Erscheinung, Schein, Phänomen, Manifestation, Offenbarung*), conceived, from Hegel to Heidegger, as a complex variation upon the Kantian lexicon of the 'phenomenon'. [94] The untranslatable can thus be either a singular word with several determinations or the historical unfolding of an entire philosophical problem, or even of an entire 'tradition,' based on a single 'original' – here Kant's. What generates a considerable confusion is the framing of the project as a whole in the terms of a philosophy (and politics) of

[91] Barbara Cassin (ed.) *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* eds. Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra and Michael Woods (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. xvii.
[92] For both a restricted and an extended explanation of this expression, *see*: Etienne Balibar, '"Quasi-Transcendentals": Foucault's Point of Heresy and the Transdisciplinarity of the Episteme.' *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no 5-6 (2015), pp. 45-77.
[93] Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, p. 265.
[94] What Françoise Dastur's article reveals is that the interplay, reversal and re-signification of these terms function as a condensed, one could even say 'structural-semiotic' history of phenomenology through its 'complex game[s] of differentiations'. Ibid., pp. 281-6.

language, which has the effect of masking some of the philosophical-historical questions at stake.

Starting from the 'difficulty of translating in philosophy', the project is set against the dominance of the 'globalized Anglo-American' or so-called 'globish': in such a 'regime', sustained attention to the plurality of languages is a political gesture in itself.[95] Seeking an alternative to both 'ontological nationalism' and 'logical universalism', Cassin describes the untranslatable as a 'symptom of difference', and the dictionary, as a 'cartography of European differences'. The Vocabulaire is defined in opposition to the self-evident universality of the concept (or universal language), positioning itself vis-à-vis globish in a similar manner that the German Romantics situated themselves against French hegemony, yet without falling into the Heideggerian excess of 'philosophical exception'. These differences must be at once non-hierarchical and determinate. It is Cassin's usage of a Humboldtian conception of language that enables her to move from semantic differences towards 'visions of the world', or from 'terminological networks' towards a 'geography of cultures'. Following Humboldt, Cassin claims that language is only constituted by the difference of languages. What Cassin seemingly forgets is that for Humbodt, language is not simply the system of expression of a people but this spirit itself: the language is the nation itself.[96] The reference to Humboldt is thus premised on the de-historicization of difference: not only are languages discreet, and bounded entities, but they are also neutral points of access into the reality of a historically located 'culture' or perspective on the world.

Therefore, we should remain wary of the accent put on untranslatables as symptoms of differences and on multiplicity as a principle. Under the apparent political pluralism of the project there lies a highly organised plurality of examples, cases, and the dominance of a few languages (apart from the obvious domination of Greek and to a lesser extent,

[95] Barbara Cassin, 'Les Intraduisibles et Leurs Traductions', *Transeuropéennes. Revue Internationale de Pensée Critique* (2015): http://colonis.transeuropeennes.eu/fr/articles/83/Les_intraduisibles_et_leurs_traductions

[96] Patrice Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes: Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* (Paris: Scheer, 2006), p. 432. Maniglier continues: 'It is not a subject that expresses itself within a language (langue); it is a language that is an objective subjectivity, a thinking power escaped from individual subjects. Humboldt is a typical representative of the *linguistic idealism*, key moment in the anthropologisation of transcendental philosophy, which ended up making of cultures spiritual universes, by asserting that human reason could only be realised in heterogeneous universes of rationality.' p. 433, translation mine.

Latin): French, German, English. The *Vocabulaire* does not follow the *Holzwege* of an endless dissemination, for it is structured, through and through, by the history of philosophy itself, by what constitutes its tradition, the 'exceptions' that have become 'rules'. Philosophers' names, schools and 'moments' function as cross-references across the dictionary, with the effect of re-centering the *Vocabulaire* around the history of philosophy. Whilst the volume proposes itself as a dictionary or lexicon, some entries may function as pivots to the whole. In so far as they examine the changes by which entire conceptual constellations have been progressively modified, they open up the possibility of transversal readings of the dictionary. To the extent that the history of philosophy can be said to be structured by its conceptuality (hence to function as a language), the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* may even be grasped as a 'structural dictionary' of philosophy, that is, a 'translational dictionary' in a sense that will be elucidated in the next chapter.[97] Indeed, decentered from chronology in its form, the *Vocabulaire* is re-centered around a specifically French conception of the history of philosophy (French, Cassin admits, functioning as its 'metalanguage'[98]).

> What we find in this book, in a sense, is philosophy cast as a political theory of community, built up through the transference and distribution of irreducible, exceptional, semantic units. The places where languages touch reveal the limits of discrete national languages and traditions. We obtain glimpses of languages in paradoxically shared zones of non-national belonging, at the edge of mutual unintelligibility. Such zones encompass opacities at the edges of the spoken and the written, a bilingualism that owns up to the condition of un-ownable, unclaimable language property, and pervese grammatology. Untranslatables signify not because they are essentialist predicates of nation or ethnos with no ready equivalent in another language, but because they mark singularities of expression that contour a worldscape according to mistranslation, neologism, and semantic dissonance.[99]

These problems have taken on new dimensions with the translation of the *Vocabulaire* into other languages, bringing to the fore extra or even 'meta' layers of untranslatability.[100] For its English version (2014), the editors decided to 'eliminate the

[97] Of course, this dictionary is necessarily incomplete and dis-harmonic, since (1) the history of philosophy is ongoing and (2) its pattern of interconnexions is not one-all but one-multiple. On this Serresian notion, see *supra*, ch. 3 p. 116.

[98] Cassin, 'Les Intraduisibles et Leurs Traductions'.

[99] Emily Apter, 'Introduction', in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, p. xv.

[100] As Apter notes, 'Once English intervened at the level of translating a French translation of German, one could sa that 'Meta' untranslatability reared its head, which is to say, an interference at the level of translating unforeseen by the article's author and at odds with her

reference to Europe', and to globalize its scope, albeit admitting the difficulty of the enterprise given the 'undeniable European focus of the book'.[101] Not only does the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* includes references to Anglo-American 'theory', but the project as a whole is now framed in relation to translation studies and comparative literature, two disciplinary constructs that were *de facto* excluded by the French version. Arguing for a 'similar politics with a different scope,'[102] Emily Apter pursued some of the questions arisen in the *Dictionary* in *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013). In this book, she proposes to 'activate untranslatability as a theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature' against the backdrop of what she considers as a hasty global re-systematization of the literary field under the umbrella of 'world literature'. For Apter, translation is and should remain a model of 'de-owned literature,'[103] which 'complicates nation-based epistemes and literary denominations'.[104] It should serve to articulate a 'critical praxis', 'in which the Realpolitik of language conflict draws on and transforms the philological heritage of humanistic transference, displacement and exile.'[105] Such a construction leans on the possibility of an immediate passage between semioticity as philological method and the political 'ecologies' of language under globalization, mapping the conflicts arising through translation upon the conflicts inherent to cultural integration and exclusion under globalized capitalism (whereas Cassin mapped linguistic differences directly onto geopolitical ones). Yet for translation to function as a pivot between the field of forces of language politics and the philological model of the *translatio studiorum*, it seems that some other mediation is required, which exceeds literary theory, and may be constructed, in schematic terms, either with a pragmatic philosophy of language, or with a semiotic ontology. In both cases, what is lost is the historical dimension of the 'untranslatable' and the temporality proper to translation. This raises the following question: is it possible to deploy a reflection on 'etymology', 'philology' and the history of concepts in a way that is not modelled upon the retrieval of an 'original' nor structured by a self-evident conception of the 'tradition' ?

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or his argument about a given term's untranslatability in a specific linguistic context.' Ibid., p. xii.

[101] Ibid., p. ix.

[102] Ibid.

[103] Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London and New York: Verso, 2013), p. 15.

[104] Ibid., p. 31.

[105] Ibid., pp. 43-4.

Cultural Translation, Travelling Theory

The notion of 'cultural translation' was first conceptualised in the notorious collection published in 1986 by James Clifford and George Marcus', *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. The concept of 'cultural translation' is thus directly related to the moment of the inscription of 'post-structuralism' into interpretive ethnography. Nested in the crisis of anthropology opened up by the decolonisation era, this book analysed the consequences of the displacement of anthropology to ethnographic *writing* and operated this watershed shift within its own discipline through readings of Foucault, Derrida and Barthes, but also, albeit to a lesser extent, by reference to Benjamin's works. The concept of 'writing', besides inscribing the ethnographer's gaze in a historical field of power, involved the refashioning of ethnography as an interdisciplinary discourse.[106] In this context, Derrida's 'generalised writing' seems to render the fieldwork infinitely expandable, thus realising 'ethnography' as the experimental counter-science that Foucault had rather enigmatically called forth two decades earlier, in *the Order of Things*. In Clifford and Marcus' interpretive framework, the 'primitive', the 'native informant' and the 'indigenous' have become 'others' in an interplay of reciprocal positions:

> Ethnography in the service of anthropology once looked out at clearly defined others, defined as primitive, or tribal, or non-Western, or pre-literate, or nonhistorical – the list, if extended, soon becomes incoherent. Now ethnography encounters others in relation to itself, while seeing itself as other.[107]

'Writing' the other's culture is not only a poetic act, it involves a certain interpretation process, which can be understood as a *translation* process.[108] In fact, Talal Asad's chapter, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology', generally regarded as the originating point of the contemporary reflection on 'cultural

[106] James Clifford and George E. Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography : A School of American Research Advanced Seminar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 1-3.

[107] Ibid., p. 23.

[108] Vincent Crapanzo provides us with a telling example of this view: 'Like translation, ethnography is a somewhat provisional way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages' ('Hermes' Dilemma: The Masking of Subversion in Ethnographic Description' in *Writing Culture*, p. 51. James Clifford, for his part, writes that 'Much of our knowledge about other cultures must now be seen as contingent, the problematic outcome of intersubjective dialogue, translation, and projection.'('On Ethnographic Allegory', *Writing Culture,* p. 109). The influence of Benjamin's writings is crucial in both chapters.

translation', runs counter to the upbeat tone of the rest of the volume. For the author of *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), the idea of translating culture can not do away with the geopolitics of language inequalities. With these asymmetries in mind Asad gives Benjamin's take on Rudolf Pannwitz a new valence. The possibility of 'expanding and deepening' one's own tongue through the foreign language, he argues, does not depend on the goodwill of the translator, but on 'the willingness of the translator's *language* to subject itself to this transforming power'.[109] Above all, this process does not rest on goodwill but on political-economical relations.[110] While the other contributions to Clifford and Marcus' volume try to construct an ethnographic writing that is oriented by the possibility of a constant experimental redrawing of the relations between the self and the other, Asad puts the accent on the ineliminable power-differential between cultures in their historical connexions. The problem of 'cultural translation' would henceforth be structured by this contradictory exigency, which nicely captures the new ethnographic position. It oscillates between 'predicament' and self-redemption, simultaneously entailing the *involvement* of the interpreter of culture within the intimacy of the cultural field and its relations of forces (translation as transformative experience) and the maintaining of *irreducible differences* in the medium in which the latter operates, such as institutions, languages, or history (translation as 'transcoding').

Returning to this moment of emergence helps us understand the proliferation of the ways in which the concept of 'cultural translation' was to be subsequently used. Aside from providing a way of rethinking the process of interpretation in transcultural intercourse from a cognitive, social or political standpoint, the term was increasingly associated with the complex dynamic of cultural contacts in colonial and postcolonial societies, thereby echoing a number of other notions, such as creolization, hybridity or transculturation.[111] As Young remarks, it is Homi Bhabha who designed a bridge between the two sides of this equation by turning the concept around: 'in his description, the "native" becomes the new migrant, who then translates his or her own culture into that of the new host community. This means that it is the subaltern, not the

[109] Talal Asad, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology' in *Writing Culture*, p. 157.
[110] Ibid., p. 158.
[111] These terms can be, respectively, associated with the figures of Edouard Glissant, Homi Bhabha and Fernando Ortiz.

anthropologist, who becomes the mediator [...]'[112] Once 'applied' within sociology and migration studies, Young continues, the expression was rapidly generalised to the 'processes and conditions of contemporary human migrancy.' [113] However, the successive appropriations of this insufficiently defined notion often had the paradoxical effect of re-naturalizing 'cultures', via languages, into the older paradigm of 'cultural contacts' (Boas, Herskovitz), leaving aside the productive ambiguity initially contained in the notions of interpretation and language.

The set of ideas at the origin of the expression 'travelling theory', named after the title of an article by Edward Saïd first published in 1983 in *The World, the Text and the Critic* is no less intricate. It can broadly be grasped as a commentary on the 'becoming-theory' of Marxist politics, combined with a more classical reflection on the displacement of ideas, once 'exiled' from their original context. For these two issues, the 'North-American' context of the 1980s provided a particularly vivid illustration. In his article, Saïd addresses the problem of formalism then associated to the long dominant, New Criticism movement as a universal problem of *theory*. The aim of this text is to show that even the supposedly most radical 'ideas' were at risk of theoretical closure if 'unexposed to the complex enfolding of the social world.'[114] His study case, which was anything but incidental, was the 'travel' of Lukács' concept of totality into the theoretical production of one of his disciples, Lucien Goldmann. Moving from 'revolutionary Budapest' to a literary study of Pascal and Racine, 'reification-and-totality' had been transformed into a formal tool of literary criticism and brought back to its idealistic core.[115] Saïd's illustrates clearly the movement from revolutionary theory to theory and the shift between different types of theoretical generalities. As Saïd explains, Lukács considered 'theory' to be 'what consciousness produced, not as an avoidance of reality but as a revolutionary will completely committed to worldliness and change,'[116] hence the paradox of the theoretical becoming of his own 'theory'. But the example is also singular because Lukács' concept of 'totality' in itself constituted a dynamic of generalisation, a call to movement that was meant to be, for political and

[112] Robert J.C. Young, 'Cultural Translation as Hybridisation', *Trans-Humanities*, 5 (2012), p. 160.
[113] Ibid., p. 162.
[114] Edward W. Said, 'Travelling Theory' in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 242.
[115] Ibid., pp. 234-5.
[116] Ibid., p. 234.

strategic reasons, an 'overstatement'.[117] Therefore, the contribution of the metaphor of 'travelling theory' was to raise the awareness of the critic to the conditions in which an idea or theory had emerged and gained acceptance, its trajectory through different historical situations, and its transformation in the process. For Saïd, however, the crucial point was less the *passage* between widely different contextual moments, than the practical *resistances* opposed to such and such an idea or theory in each of its new contexts of appearance. For these resistances were witnesses not only of its social enactment in each case, but also kept the conflictual relationship between theory and practice alive in each context: '[…] above all, critical consciousness is awareness of the resistances to the theory, reactions to it elicited by those concrete experiences or interpretations with which it is in conflict'.[118] In other words, Saïd's 'travelling theory' reformulates, through Lukács, the problem of the survival of philosophy after Marx's critique,[119] from the standpoint of an irresolvable contradiction between literary criticism and politics.

Spatialization of Knowledge – Spatialization of History

However, subsequent references to 'travelling theory', in their rapid dissemination across the humanities and the social sciences, have tended to omit Saïd's case study, with the effect of putting aside the Lukácsian problematic of generalisation or totalization, thus limiting 'travelling theory' to a contextual or practical approach to the global circulation of ideas. After 1989, the increasing centrality of globalization both as object of study and as a challenge to existing methods, had the effect of merging 'cultural translation' and 'travelling theory' into a single, transdisciplinary theoretical field.[120] The critique of methodological nationalism that transversally affected most

[117] Ibid., pp. 239-240. Through this example, Said underscores an important point, which is that of the relationship between the internal logic of the concept (summarized here as 'reification-and-totality') and its logic of generalisation. One consequence of the travelling of theory is to challenge the distinction between the inner aspect, or the content of a concept, and its 'outer' aspect or historical context, usually considered as the sheer medium or space of its unfolding. However, Said's notions of 'idea' and 'theory' here make it difficult to analyse this dynamic in any greater detail.

[118] Ibid., p. 242.

[119] See: Peter Osborne, *Philosophy in Cultural Theory* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 5.

[120] The following quotation from a 1989 article by the ethnographer James Clifford is a paradigmatic example of the immediate transformation and overdetermination of Saïd's notion: 'Theory is no longer naturally "at home" in the West -a powerful place of Knowledge, History, or Science, a place to collect, sift, translate, and generalize. Or, more cautiously, this

disciplines in these years (the direct effect of which was the creation, in the Anglophone academic world, of new disciplinary constructs such as 'diaspora and migration studies', 'global history', 'Atlantic history', 'minority studies') played an important role in this convergence, turning 'translation' and 'travel' into meta-metaphors of the global condition. Translation studies did not escape this movement, evolving, in the same years, 'from formalism towards a more inclusive socio-cultural paradigm.'[121] As the 'transnational' started to replace the 'international' as the dominant ontological plane of historical understanding, the 'translational' became an increasingly pervasive category of cultural-historical intelligibility.[122] This phenomenon can be grasped at two different levels. On the one hand, it signals the integration of irruptive concepts associated to the postcolonial paradigm and the critique of race into the theoretical framework of disciplinary constructs, an integration which tends to leave aside its critical core in favour of a neutral and overall positive form of 'transnationalism'. This is what Emily Apter, for example, denounces as the 'planetary euphoria' associated to the recent revival of the Goethean category of 'world literature'. Mieke Bal's *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002), generalising 'travel' as an image of transdisciplinarity, is a telling instance of this impact in the re-elaboration of the concept of culture. After the critique of essentialism, orientalism and the ethnographic gaze, 'culture' can only live on negatively, that is, only relationally and as perpetual movement.[123] The surfacing of the translational question

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privileged place is now increasingly contested, cut across, by other locations, claims, trajectories of knowledge articulating racial, gender, and cultural differences. But how is theory appropriated and resisted, located and displaced? How do theories travel among the unequal spaces of postcolonial confusion and contestation? What are their predicaments? How does theory travel and how do theorists travel? Complex, unresolved questions.' James Clifford, 'Notes on Theory and Travel,' *Inscriptions 5* (1989), p. 179.

[121] Daniel Simeoni, 'Translation and society. The emergence of a conceptual relationship' in *In Translation – Reflections, Refractions, Transformations,* eds. Paul St-Pierre and Prafulla C. Kar (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), p. 16. Yet as Simeoni highlights, cultural studies, postcolonial studies and feminist scholarship had various impacts on translation studies scholar depending on their location. Whilst, he argues, the North American and Indian schools are generally 'aligned' on a post-structural, 'cultural studies' paradigm, the continental researchers have tended to work with 'more traditional disciplines in the human sciences'. In France, Michel Espagne's important project on French-German 'cultural transfers' (Labex TransferS http://transfers.ens.fr), which grounds itself on a rigorous philological, historical and sociological approach, is a good example of this relative impermeability. See Michel Espagne, 'La notion de transfert culturel', *Revue Sciences/Lettres*, 2013 <http://rsl.revues.org/219>

[122] Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: The Philosophy of Contemporary Art*, (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2013), p. 163; Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, p. 412.

[123] 'It would be presumptuous to pronounce what "culture" is, except perhaps to say that it can only be envisioned in a plural, changing, and mobile existence. The objects of study of the

also occurred at a time when various transcultural forms of identification were increasingly accused of lacking political content. Once critical of the postcolonial national order, Edouard Glissant's creolization and his poetics of relation, for example, had supposedly become indistinguishable from globalization itself; formerly 'decolonial' categories of identification were suddenly turned into their parodied, neoliberal counterparts.[124] By contrast, 'translation' attributes a clearer role to *interpretation* as practice. Not only does translation refer to specific practices of interpretation, which can metonymically instantiate the historical mediation of cultural and theoretical forms,[125] but it also calls attention to the constitution or construction of generalities, to the instantiation of theory and the conditions of possibility of generalisation itself. Translation thus embodies the predicament of a 'culture' nominalistically reduced to a set of practices, hence groundless yet thoroughly *articulated*.

What the circulation of these terms has thus far revealed is that 'translation' and 'travel' help us construct new forms of spatialization of history, which function as counter-models to the previous one, which was characterized by the imperial 'denial of coevalness', i.e. the projection of the structure of progress onto geography as realized by the post-Enlightenment rationalization of world-history.[126] Consequently, they participate to a movement of re-narrativization of history from the standpoint of the critique of anthropology. Not only do they claim to produce different conceptual genealogies of the present, but they also tend to stress their constructive dimension: each of these 'histories' revealing a new spatiality, the particularities of a certain history and the materiality of its circulation. Yet, if we fail to articulate these 'narratives' re-elaborations with a concept of historical time, they risk remaining mere 'counter-narratives', and their political relevance, symbolic.

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disciplines that comprise the humanities belong to culture but do not, together, constitute it. The qualifier "cultural" takes the existence and importance of cultures for granted, but it does not predicate the 'analysis' on a particular conception of "culture". For, in distinction from, say, cultural anthropology, "cultural analysis" does not study culture. "Culture" is not its object.' Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 9.

[124] See, for example: Chris Bongie, 'Edouard Glissant: Dealing in Globality', in C. Fordsick & D. Murphy, (eds.) *Postcolonial Thought in the French-Speaking World* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2009) and Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester University Press, 2001), pp. 118-132.

[125] Peter Osborne, 'Modernism as Translation', p. 57.

[126] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (Verso Books, 2010), p. 17.

Translation, Generalisation, Semiotics

This generalised use of the concept of translation or so-called 'translational turn' has mostly been analysed negatively as an unrestricted and un-critical metaphorical proliferation and criticized as an abusive textualization of culture. Confronted with the latter, the task of criticism would be the elaboration of strategies by which the concept of translation could be limited and *regulated*.[127] And yet, it seems that as long as 'theory' continues to attempt to legislate, *a posteriori*, on the uses of this concept, such enterprise will remain unsuccessful. One cannot extract 'translation' from circulation and proceed to its methodological fixation, when what should be highlighted through translation is precisely the uses, re-elaboration and moves across different contexts of a given term. On the contrary, the pervasiveness of the globalization paradigm in the humanities and the social sciences has *revealed* the extent to which translation can be considered almost identical to metaphor. By trying to legislate on the uses of the term 'translation', one ends up seeking to legislate the metaphorical movement itself. Drawing on this problematic by remarking on the function of metaphors in Benjamin's 'Task of the Translator', Derrida evocatively suggests:

> Let us study again the metaphors or the ammetaphoras, the *Übertragungen* that are translations and metaphors of translation, translations of translation or metaphors of metaphor. Let us study all of these Benjaminian passages.[128]

Taken together in their mirroring they reveal the abyssal structure of translation, which, once transformed into a theoretical prop, tends to function as a 'chiral echo of its initial sense'.[129] This suggests that the methodological discussions around 'translation',

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[127] '[…] will the translation category, as it moves as a 'travelling concept' beyond the textual and linguistic level, stubbornly stick to the path of purely metaphorical uses of the translation concept? Or will new research approaches begin to elaborate a more sophisticated and detailed translation perspective in methodological and analytical terms? Bachman Medick, 'Translation – A Concept and Model for the Study of Culture' in *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective. Travelling Concepts for the Study of Culture* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2014) p. 25.

[128] Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', p. 214.

[129] Marc Bernardot and Hélène Thomas's analysis of 'hybridity' strikes us as particularly close to the issue at stake: 'The travels and the loops between natural sciences and social sciences – inevitably metaphorical – imply manipulations and translations that eclipse part of the initial meaning without making it disappear altogether. They give to these notions the efficiency of magic, the vivacity of tales and the power of enactment, which finally grant them the energy proper to the displacement of thought, to write in the manner of Paul Ricoeur or Gilles

if only elaborated through its current 'usages', can only amount to a progressive emptying out of its content in this metaphorical drift. What is required, instead, from a 'theory' of translation, is a more direct engagement with this presumed weakness, an actual confrontation with the essentially multi-scalar character of this relation. Indeed, what characterizes the *philosophical* approaches to translation is precisely to point out the immediate multi-scalar of the relation it constitutes. The philosophical problem of translation is fundamentally predicated on its own demultiplication. Just as the linguistic problem of translation invariably raises the question of the meta-linguistic instance from which to validate equivalence (or its absence), the philosophical problem of translation encompasses meta-philosophical questions, questions dealing with philosophical language and its limits. Hence, 'problematizing' philosophical translation entails shifting between the 'inside' and the 'outside' of philosophy, but also between inter-philosophical, intra-philosophical, and intersemiotic translation.

In the conclusion of *the Experience of the Foreign*, Berman had already remarked on the tendency of translation to generalise itself, a discovery which he traced back to Goethe: 'Even as it is a particular case of interlingual, intercultural, and inter-literary communication, translation is also the model for any process of this kind.'[130] In 1984, it was Michel Serres' theory of 'duction', along with Novalis' and Steiner's philosophies of translation, which constituted Berman's evidence of the natural expansionism of the concept.[131] As Berman argued, this recursivity or essential transitivity of translation is a direct effect of its semiological functioning; the exemplarity of the translation model being directly analogous to the structural privilege of language over other systems of signs: 'in one sense language is only a sign system among others; but in another, it is the system of systems, the one that makes possible the interpretation of all the others'.[132] Whilst Saussure famously projected semiology as a future 'science of signs'

Deleuze. However this tendency towards bursts of semiotic fever also constitutes their 'Achilles' heal', because of the *mise en abyme* and of the chiral echo of the initial meaning. Thus functions the hybrid which in turn hybrids itself, always pushing meaning further in a meta of meta movement, without ever completely distancing itself from the roar of total ideological war which it is simultaneously the object, the origin, the vector and the lethal weapon.' (Translation mine) Marc Bernardot and Hélène Thomas, 'Notes sur l'hybridité', *Revue Asylon(s)* 13, (2014): http://colonis.reseau-terra.eu/article1327.html

[130] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign,* pp. 182-3.

[131] Ibid., p. 183.

[132] Ibid. This is a proposition that Berman took from Benvéniste, but which he could as well have borrowed from Barthes.

of which linguistics would be a part (the 'study of the life of signs within social life',[133]) this 'law' crucially inverts the order of priorities between linguistics and semiology, thereby installing linguistics in a hegemonic position towards larger semiotic systems, which it did not originally have.[134]

On Berman's account, the structural positioning of translation as a general model of 'intercommunication' is *analogous* to that of linguistics to other signifying systems. However, it is not by virtue of this analogy that translation may function as an 'archetype' for other forms of intercommunication, but because of its singular 'signifying thickness': a special relationship, which Walter Benjamin termed the 'connexion of life' (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*) between an original and its translation.

> The relation that links a translation to its original is unique in kind. No other relation – from one text to another, from one language to another, from one culture to another – is comparable to it. And it is precisely this uniqueness that makes for the signifying density of translation; to interpret the other exchanges in terms of translation is to want (rightly or wrongly) to give them the same signifying density.[135]

This establishes translation as a singular semiological mode, at once essentially relational and essentially processual. In so far as translation can be considered as a process and relation, it may be conceptualized at these two levels at once – at the level of social relationality and at the level of the production of theoretical generalities. According to such a view, the importance of translation would be measured through its effects: displacements and invention, in the theoretical domain, but also syncretism, creolization and new cultural forms, in the domain of cultural practices and sociality. The central theoretical operation involved here, as Osborne has underscored, is the inclusion of interpretation within the historical process. Translation can be said to refer to the interpretive aspect of the social intercourse, which is itself part of the process of

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[133] Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes*, p. 435.

[134] In *La vie énigmatique des signes* (2006), Patrice Maniglier reinterpreted Saussure against the grain of such an inversion, demonstrating that the semiological project should instead be grasped as a singular *ontology*, as a 'science of the objective spirit'. Such a proposition is directly grounded in Saussure's approach of langue as an essentially historical and social entity, as a 'reality in continuous variation' (p. 402). Hence, for Saussure, the identity of a phonem such as *alka* is only given through its repetition through time, there is no essence pre-existing these repetitions. As Maniglier summarizes, 'Languages [*les langues*] have nothing else in common than [the fact of] being realities in continuous variation.' (Ibid.) Translations mine.

[135] Berman, *The Experience of the Foreign*, p. 183.

conceptual generalisation. It can thus be simultaneously understood as a hermeneutic instrument and a logical, or ontological category. However, reducing the 'logic' of translation to a post-Aristotelian logics of universal-particular misses the point.[136] Indeed, the interesting specificity of translation is precisely not to rely on a classical subsumptive logic, but on a *semiotic* logic of generalisation.

Epilogue: Translation's Aporias

It is no incident if, over the last few decades, the notion of translation has been actively solicited in the reconfiguration of comparative disciplines (anthropology, comparative literature, international history) and in the definition of cultural studies. Comparison remains a chiefly cognitive operation, requiring the complete delimitation, in time and space, of the entities compared, and thereby involves an *external* subject-position or *bird's-eye view* to realize a comparative synthesis. By contrast, translation, because it is exerted in the medium of language, is an exercise of equivalence-production without grasping of the whole. The bird's-eye view comes only later, as a retrospective reconstruction of the translational paths undertaken. As Naoki Sakai explains:

> Translation is an instance of continuity in discontinuity and a poietic social practice that institutes a relation at the site of incommensurability. [...] translation is just like other social practices that render the points of discontinuity in social formation continuous. Only retrospectively and after translation, therefore, can we recognize the initial incommensurability as a gap, a crevice, or border between fully constituted entities, spheres, or domains. *But when represented as a gap, crevice or border, it is no longer incommensurate*.[137]

As many commentators have highlighted, at the centre of the translational act lies an encounter, a discontinuous passage that is not fully available to the experiencing subject, be it individual or collective. In this act of joining *in* disjoining and disjoining *in* joining, translation is a quintessentially aporetic operation, if we think of *aporia* as an 'impassable'; as 'without passage' (a-poros). Figured in such a way, translation enables us to conceptualise a form of interpretation that is not only *each time* situated or 'linguistically' determined, but also a movement between different locations or situations. A proposition that the second part of this thesis will substantiate is that the

[136] See : Osborne, 'Modernism as Translation', p. 57.
[137] Naoki Sakai, *Translation and Subjectivity: On 'Japan' and Cultural Nationalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 13-4. Emphasis mine.

idea of translation encompasses a notion of *relationality* that is at once *historically determinate* and a *passage*, a bridge over the 'incommensurable', which paradoxically functions as a self-explanatory 'measurement' of this incommensurability. Lacking another yardstick of comparison, this measurement remains relatively opaque and irreducible not only to the speaker's gaze, but also to the philosopher's: the task of a relational focus is, precisely, to exceed the scope of the terms in relation. In this sense, translation constitutes a *relational method*, in the double sense of being a 'method of communication' and establishing a historically-specific connexion between separated forms, texts or concepts.

This abstract description explains, in turn, the permanent polarization of the philosophies of translation between 'communicational' and 'hermeneutic' conceptualisations, and the disjunctive character of the translation concept. Radicalizing this disjunction in formulating the problem of subjectivation, Spivak's theory appears bound up with this founding dichotomy. What Derrida had initially set up as a spectrum (the text being situated between absolute translatability and absolute untranslatablity) is hardened into the opposition between 'the semiotic' and 'literature', or between the operations of 'transcoding' and 'translation'. As in Cassin and Apter's cases, taking the linguistic as 'norm', it is as if the latter was the *only* limit that a theory of translation had to overcome – overcoming this limit would challenge the ideology of equivalence and the integral (economic, political, social) 'system' that it is deemed to be structuring. In other words, this 'ideology' of equivalence is reciprocated with an equally problematic -because insufficiently mediated- stress on singularity, which creates a short-circuit between the 'literary-poetic' and the 'cultural-political' fields. To a certain degree, this very divide is at the root of the 'ideological' production of our first historical genealogy of translation, which, from German Romanticism, through hermeneutics and deconstruction, has put the emphasis on the singularity of literary idioms and aesthetic experience as the *authentic* relation to what is *other*.

Hence, Romantic theories of translation (read through Berman's prism), and deconstructive approaches both converge into producing a paramountly ethical understanding of translation. In both cases, translation is the locus of a transformative

and 'decentring' experience of the 'other'. Whilst the Romantic experience of translation is profoundly connected to national or cultural self-definition, the deconstructive, or post-deconstructive experience of translation extracts itself from the teleological straightjacket of *Bildung* philosophies by stressing its aporetic nature. To the assimilation of 'difference' Derrida substitutes its messianic, or ethical suspension. For Spivak, the aporia between incommensurable languages becomes the very locus of historical difference, the 'silence', which contests the possibility of 'epistemologizing' or retrieving 'knowledge' from this experience. To this aporetic definition of translation corresponds a peculiar temporality of *inachèvement* and interruption, a temporality, which defines both the paradoxical 'impossibility and necessity' of translation and each language as a self-differing system of signs. In this way, translation removes itself from the circularity of nationalist and nativist 'claims to ancestry' (or 'roots') and contributes to the elaboration of the non-totalizable time of *différance* ('routes'[138]). By the same token however, it becomes hardly reconcilable with an account of 'real universalization' or globalization, for it names an impossibility rather than a process, a question rather than a form of historicity.

[138] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 19.

PART 2

CHAPTER III

From Form to Sense: Serres' Leibnizian Structuralism

The origin of Michel Serres' concept of translation is not to be found in the practical, hermeneutical or cognitive operations of translation but in the epistemology of science. Although Serres never fully thematized translation, we find in his work a regular and organised use of translation as *method*. Translation, at once a structural and transdisciplinary method, is also a way of experimenting between the 'hard' and the 'human' sciences. Such a conception of translation has the advantage of freeing itself from its humanistic, culturalist or ethical meanings. However, this deflation of the concept comes with a certain underdetermination. Whereas the Romantic conceptions of translation tend to carry an overdetermined meaning, which stems from the cultural and political constructs attached to linguistic differences, Serres' use of this concept suggests its radical simplification into a mode of articulation or transformation. Yet, as this chapter will demonstrate, this simplification is not as innocuous as it may at first appear, but it constitutes a pivotal part of Serres' broader critique of epistemology. Drawing its force from his invention of a Leibniz-informed structuralism and the development of a singular thought of communication, his critique can be read as a plea for *heteronomy*, itself organised by a double-*decentring*: of philosophy in relation to the sciences, and of the transcendental subject of knowledge. It relies on a general philosophy of relations, which from being 'functional' in the early 1960s became increasingly 'transformational' in the 1970s. The concept of translation, I will contend, was the conceptual hinge of this trajectory.

Serres composed the essays of the first volume of the *Hermès* series between 1962 and 1967, in the span of time that separates Foucault's publication of the *History of Madness* from *The Order of Things*, at the apex of French Structuralism. At this time, Serres was teaching with Foucault in Clermont-Ferrant, before following him to the brand-new

University of Vincennes in 1968. Throughout this period, Serres developed a magisterial reading of Leibniz, which he turned into a doctoral dissertation, published in 1968: *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques*. Most of the themes of the *Hermès* series were already present, or virtually enfolded, in his interpretation of Leibniz's philosophy, in particular the relations between mathematics and *logos*, science and philosophy. But of these two terms, science would remain Serres' fundamental (although evolving) horizon of reference. His focus moved from mathematics, to thermodynamics, to biology and the sciences of the living,[1] leaving philosophical discourse to shrink into self-referentiality. Serres took seriously the Bachelardian pronouncement that the only way to speak of science is to practice it,[2] searching for ways of *practicing* science *through* philosophy. To enter the scientific process as such enabled Serres to transpose or translate some of its terms and specific sequences onto the philosophical terrain, producing new philosophical trajectories whilst disclosing the workings of science. But as well as applied and social sciences, mathematics was also forcing its way into philosophy through the rediscovery of the Vienna Circle and logical positivism, and the introduction of formal logics into philosophy departments,[3] raising anew the issue of a universal currency of thought, either logical, linguistic, or cybernetic. Michel Serres' early writings, widely read and revered by his contemporaries, emerged amidst the hope and turmoil of this period, as one of its most ambitious and fragile theoretical propositions, resuscitating the dream of a unitary science whilst pluralising its bearings *ad infinitum*.

Very little, if anything, has been written concerning Serres' theory of translation. Given its relevance to the rest of his works and its contemporary significance for the social sciences, this omission is surprising.[4] What seems to hinder an in depth analysis of this theory is that Serres himself does not provide us with a theory of translation 'as such'; its meaning only appears in the circulation between its different instances, in the

[1] See: Michel Serres, 'The Science of Relations, an interview with Peter Hallward', trans. Alberto Toscano, *Angelaki* 8, no. 2 (2003), pp. 227-238.

[2] Georges Canguilhem, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une idéologie scientifique', *Idéologie et rationalité dans l'histoire des sciences de la vie* (Paris, Vrin, 1977), p. 108.

[3] See: Michel Serres & Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. R. Lapidus (Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 7; Alain Badiou*, the concept of model* (Melbourne, Re-Press, 2007)

[4] Madelaine Akrich, Michel Callon and especially Bruno Latour, have made explicit references to Serres' concept of translation in the genesis of the 'sociology of translation' or 'actor-network theory'. See: Madeleine Akrich, Michel Callon et Bruno Latour (eds.) *Sociologie de la traduction, Textes fondateurs* (Paris: Ecole des mines, 2006).

repeated *recourse to* translation. In fact, Michel Serres did not develop one, but several concepts of translation, which can therefore only be grasped as part of the movement of his philosophy more generally. The aim of this chapter is to account for the emergence and the function of *the concept of translation* in Serres' doctoral thesis, *The System of Leibniz and its Mathematical Models*, as well as in the broader context of his earliest philosophy. Insofar as the concept of translation mainly performs a structural role in this book, the chapter reconstructs *The System of Leibniz*'s argument at the same time as locating the workings of translation within it. This synoptic but comprehensive analysis then provides the means to situate Serres' *problem of translation* within the larger context of the French philosophical landscape of the early 1960s. This can only be done by insisting on Serres' philosophical trajectory within structuralism and on the singularity of his post-structuralism. The latter, I contend, cannot be subsumed under any of the great options available in the French philosophical landscape of the late 1960s and early 1970s, at least in their canonical expressions (e.g. Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Derrida). Without entering into thoroughgoing comparisons, this chapter makes punctual references to these figures as a way to anchor Serres in a philosophical conjuncture from which he has often been removed - as if his own claim to a singular (and 'solitary') philosophical path forced us to read him on his own terms only.[5] Before entering into the intricacies of *The System of Leibniz*, it is therefore necessary to take a look at Serres' earliest publication, 'Structure et importation: des mathématiques aux mythes'. In various ways, this programmatic article anticipates his later works as well as providing us with a limit-example, or extreme viewpoint, on his singular structuralism.

[5] On this theme, the section titled 'Le passage du Nord-Ouest' is particularly poignant. Michel Serres, *Hermès V, Le passage du Nord-Ouest* [hereafter *H5*] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), pp. 15-24.

1. Structure and Importation

> Each time – not only in Leibnizianism – that the question at hand is the adaptation of mathematical reasoning, figures or diagrams to philosophical mediation, the first methodic or strategic problem is that of transport, of metabase, of its licit or illicit character. We have started to describe these metabases in the philosophy of Leibniz because it constitutes an eminent case for their study, the most complete and the most systematic. But through this description, it is the problem of the right to importation or exportation that interests us.[6]

Serres' 'structuralist programme' was first laid out in a 1961 journal article,[7] re-published in the Introduction of *Hermès I, La Communication*: 'Structure and Importation: from Mathematics to Myths'. This early article already exhibits the specificities of Serres' approach to the philosophy of structure, framing it, broadly speaking, within a historical-epistemological field, rather than within a linguistic, anthropological or ontological one. On the one hand, the problem of structuralism poses itself above all as a problem of *importation*. Under what conditions can we legitimately import a form coming from a scientific domain (especially mathematics and linguistics) into another domain? When is a categorical mistake productive, or how shall we positively rethink the Aristotelian *metabasis eis allo genos* in favour of a broader conception of knowledge, one that would be primarily understood in term of mixture and border transgression? On the other hand, structuralism is conceived as a moment in the history of science, as part of a historical dialectic between formalism and symbolism and as such, a privileged locus for the reflection on the possible or impossible passages between these two types of language.

For Serres, modern Structuralism marks the return of Classicism, in so far as it resuscitates a model of analysis based on science rather than myth. While in the Classical era, the exact sciences figured as the 'eminent model' of method and as an

[6] Michel Serres, *Le Système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques, Etoiles-Schémas-Points* [hereafter *SL.* All translations mine], (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, [1968] 2007) note 1, p. 759.

[7] This article was initially entitled 'Analyse symbolique et méthode structurale' and published in *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger*, no. 4 (1967), pp. 437-452.

ideal of order, Romanticism, Serres explains, broke with Classicism by constituting *symbol*, rather than *order*, as 'methodic horizon'.[8] In Romanticism,

> [t]he domain of meaning does not mimic any rigorous or ordered archetype, it does not have a model fully equipped with pure reason. *One has to choose an archetype in the domain of meaning itself and project on this model the entire essence of the cultural content under analysis*. […] This or that content does not mimic any ideal model anymore, but *repeats, content for content*, a universal and concrete symbol.[9]

Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud, Serres claims, offer paradigmatic examples of the practice of symbolic analysis, which took its models from mythic history, finding a 'high compactness of meaning' in the remotest origin. This gesture is necessarily entwined with –and generative of- history; and its implicit historicity, that of eternal return. Indeed, a myth's content is precisely grasped as soon as it is shown to repeat itself, 'from myth to history, from the eternal to the evolutive'[10]. If structuralism' modernity lies in its assumed Classicism, it is a Classicism that posits the *model* as 'problem' rather than 'end'.[11] It *constructs*, rather than relies upon, a 'subjacent semantics'.[12]

> To symbolically analyse consists in *translating* a content of sense in signs, to code and decode a language. To formally analyse consists in forming a language that its own rules develop: *the possibility to translate it in contents, in models, comes after*. Either we start from sense, or we regain it (or produce it).[13]

Translation is introduced here as a *second moment,* that is, exogenous to the structural production of a language: the translation of meaning opposes itself to the construction of meaning. Importantly, these two methods -symbolic and formal- differ in the functioning of their models, in particular regarding their importability, which is to say their repeatability in different (historical or disciplinary) contexts. The structural model, because it is constructed, is deemed easily repeatable or transferable, whilst the Romantic model seems forever tied to its point of origination, both in time and space. Thus, for Serres, the key problem of structuralism is not comparability, but *ductility,*

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[8] Michel Serres, 'Structure et importation: des mathématiques aux mythes', *Hermès I, La communication* [hereafter *H1*. All translations mine], (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 22.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., p. 23.
[11] Ibid., p. 25.
[12] Ibid., p. 32.
[13] Ibid., p. 32. Emphasis added.

transport. What makes a model more importable than another? What guarantees its integrity in spite of transport?

This problem is not addressed in the body of the text, but in a lengthy footnote, where Serres introduces the main principles of his theory of communication. Following Canguilhem's conception of the 'historical articulation of thought', according to which 'the history of ideas is the history of diffusion, propagation, and communication of ideas,'[14] Serres argues that the communication of an idea through time, like that of any informational content, always leads to a certain loss of information along the way; it is governed by *entropy* and thus 'a truth can be lost'. Hence, Serres claims, history does not carry ideas without variation: ideas 'are essentially made of jamming powers (*puissances de brouillage*), or noise, which deform the transmission of a given philosophical message'[15].

> The thinker [...] transmits elements to the historical chain, of which loss would be absolutely certain if the historian did not intervene at some point. Thus, it appears mathematically true to say that philosophy would not exist without its own history. More generally, the historian is the one who makes of culture a continued creation; history is a pocket of negentropy in cultural entropy.
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> [...] Hence a thinker can hide another thinker. Newton, for instance was that noise that impeded the transmission of Leibniz's message, and Descartes is the noise which occults the Middle-Age to us, etc. A thought can thus be grasped by the historian either as order, or as noise.
>
> As a result, the thinker can only have a tragic vision of history: the waste of forgetting, the aleatory mix of the idea; and the historian a courageous vision: gathering the dispersed shreds of an idea [...].[16]

In the entropic flux of ideas, the historian resorts to *construction* in order to preserve truth. He must place himself at the source of meaning, seizing the origin not as point of departure but as 'continued creation'. By contrast to the history of ideas, which, as process of 'diffusion' of 'propagation' is aleatory, the history of science 'as history of truth' is recurrent, it 'always remains in the closest vicinity of its origin', without parasite.[17] In formalism truth lies at the surface, hence the incontestable advantage of

[14] Ibid., note 7, p. 29. Serres refers here to a 1961 article by Canguilhem, 'Nécessité de la "diffusion scientifique"', *Revue de l'enseignement supérieur,* no. 3 (1961).
[15] Ibid., note 7, p. 29.
[16] Ibid., note 7, p. 30.
[17] Ibid., note 7, p. 29.

structural models over symbols for importation, transfer, circulation, of cultural meanings.[18] This analysis is accompanied by Serres' definition of 'structure', which he reveals, finds its most 'precise and codified' formulation in modern algebra:

> […] *a structure is a set of undefined significations* (whereas an archetype is a concrete ensemble with over-defined significations) […] *grouping elements in any number* (elements of which content is not specified) *and relations, in finite number, of which nature is not defined*, but only the function regarding the elements. One obtains a *model* (a paradigm) of this structure if one specifies the content of elements and the nature of relations in a determinate way. *This structure is thus the formal analogon of all the concrete models it organises*. Instead of symbolising a content, a model 'realises' a structure. This word has here this precise meaning and never another one. We can understand the frenzy that it generates only if we think of the telephone game that progressively deteriorates knowledge through word-of-mouth. [19]

Serres presents this purely axiomatic definition of structure against the backdrop of its faded or less legitimate versions; as the 'point at which the content of the concept [of structure] is the most veracious (*véridique*)'.[20] Although modelled upon Bourbaki's definition of Mother structures, this definition, along with the rest of Serres' article, can be usefully read alongside Deleuze's 1967 seminal article 'How do we recognize

[18] By displacing the question of structure and structuralism onto the terrain of diffusion and, already, *communicability*, 'Structure and Importation' also defends structuralism from the accusation of being a sheer effect of fashion, an 'ideology'. For Canguilhem, an ideology, as 'presumptuous extensions of a model of scientificity […] transposes a norm of truth beyond the conditions of application of the concepts that ground this model, that make this norm exist.' (Étienne Balibar, *Lieux et noms de la vérité* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1994), p. 184. Translation mine) On the contrary, Serres aims at offering rules and rigour in the transposition and displacements of models through scientific disciplines and time. In a television interview with Alain Badiou, dated January 1968, 'Model and Structure', Serres formulates this relatively simple but crucial problem in the following terms: 'Sometimes, in order to understand a given phenomenon, we bring it under models which come from a theoretical field different than the field being studied. For example, we have electric models, electronic models, models coming from information theory, for a certain number of organic phenomena […] The problem that I consider most pressing is the following. Do we have the right and under what conditions can we effectively import a certain concept from another theoretical space into another theoretical field? ' Alain Badiou and Michel Serres, 'Model and structure ', in Tzuchien Tho & Giuseppe Bianco (transl and ed.), *Badiou & the Philosophers, interrogating 1960s French Philosophy* (London & New York, Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 123-4.

[19] Michel Serres, 'Structure et Importation : des mathématiques aux mythes ', p. 32.

[20] Ibid., p. 28. David Rabouin has pointed to the problematic character of defining a 'serious' structuralism against a 'non-serious' one by grounding it on Bourbaki's definition of Mother structures (algebraic, order structure or topological structure). Rabouin observes that when this mathematical model was taken up in the social sciences and philosophy, it had lost in relevance. Since the reflections led by the Bourbaki group in the 1930s, mathematics had considerably evolved, in particular through category theory, which did not fit into structural mathematics because the latter had been framed in a foundational way and in a set theory framework. See: David Rabouin, 'Structuralisme et comparatisme en sciences humaines', in Patrice Maniglier (ed.), *Le Moment philosophique des années 1960* (Paris, PUF, 2011), pp. 38-57.

structuralism?' Drawing on different authors (Lévi-Strauss, Jakobson, Lacan, Althusser, Foucault), Deleuze's text establishes the family resemblance of structuralism through seven criteria. His point of departure is firmly established in the Saussurian analysis of the sign, which configures the relational regime of structure in a very different way than Serres does. For Serres, the relational regime in which elements are entangled can be determined through a *model*, the abstract 'structure' *gains concretion* through a model, thus implying the coexistence of different levels of abstraction. In Deleuze's definition of structure the elements mutually specify each other, they are determined in their differential relation (*rapport différentiel*), *i.e.* they *cannot be defined* by a class of elements.[21] The opposition, or inter-position of these elements constitutes the general systematicity of the structure and the mark of the symbolic. Serres' earlier account of structure, in contrast, point to a 'potentially definable class of elements,'[22] which can thus function as invariants. It emphasizes the notions of function (rules of formation) and models. For him, the production of sense is ensured, not through the repetition of the relation (the differential) but through the repeatability of its models. As a result, the relations which 'ground' his structuralism *can be defined in a manifold way*, they are not limited to relations of oppositions or difference, but can undertake an unlimited range of specifications.

However, Serres and Deleuze's ideas of structuralism converge in postulating structure as a virtual space prior to its empirical realisations. Whilst the Saussurian version of structure (or rather, 'system') was predicated upon the arbitrary nature of the sign, originating in the enigmatic ontology of the *langue* and the duplicity of the sign,[23] Serres and Deleuze begin with the virtual, depicting the fundamental indeterminacy (or underdeterminacy) of structure in the abstract space of topology. For both of them, 'structuralism cannot be separated from the project of a new transcendental philosophy.'[24] Serres' early works can be grasped as attempts to draw the contours of this new transcendental philosophy, that is, to provide a philosophically strong version of structuralism. Such structuralism would not be limited to specific domains of

[21] Gilles Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?' in *Desert Islands And Other Texts, 1953--1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Mike Taormina (Los Angeles and Cambridge: Semiotext, 2004), pp. 170-192.; Rabouin, 'Structuralisme et comparatisme en sciences humaines', p. 42.
[22] Rabouin, 'Structuralisme et comparatisme en sciences humaines', p. 42.
[23] See : Patrice Maniglier Maniglier, Patrice, *La vie énigmatique des signes: Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* (Paris: Editions Léo Scheer, 2006).
[24] Deleuze, 'How Do We Recognize Structuralism?', p. 174.

knowledge (mythology, linguistics, anthropology), but would embrace the totality of the knowable, or, in its pre-critical guise, the 'Encyclopedia'. In this article, Serres presents himself as the herald of Structuralism as a 'new classicism', announcing the reconciliation of truth and meaning and the end of the 'Romantic' era.[25] But in light of his subsequent works, these two models of *model* have in fact remained the two pillars of a dialectic he never ceased to explore. In his study of Leibniz, Serres left his initial historicist proposition aside and turned these conflicting models into a general methodic organon.

By giving a 'precise and codified' version of 'structure', Serres is not only trying to deflate the ideological character of structuralism, he is offering a model of cultural analysis defined by its codification of *transdisciplinary* importation and translation (*translation* in French) of models. However, Serres maintains a problematic ambiguity in the concept of 'model' – intermediary between the formal and the empirical, or between pure virtuality and actuality. A model is a precise 'content', but a content of what 'sort'? The immediate problem in establishing these laws of repetition lies in the question of *resemblance*: how do we codify the resemblance of models? Through their *law* of formation. But how (the problem of resemblance repeats itself) can we identify the same law of formation across different domains? This quandary explains why, in the following years, the concept of 'translation' would replace that of 'importation', and why the problem of entropy (here only introduced in the footnotes), would gradually intrude on the integrality of the scientific organon. Although Serres' structuralism initially relied on an algebraic model as its 'irradiating kernel', this *centrality* of algebra, he would later admit, constituted both its 'power and its greatest default.'[26] Legitimising mathematics' outstanding status without succumbing to any logical

[25] For Serres, Bachelard's oeuvre represents a limit-position between these two types of cultural analysis: '[t]he contemporary idea of critique can easily be defined as a passage to the limit of Bachelard's incompletion (*inachèvement*)' (*H1*, p. 22) According to Serres, Bachelard remains in the long XIXth century in his use of myths, but he opens up a new realm by seeking structural rigour in cultural contents. Bachelard's 'psychoanalysis of material signifying imagination' (p. 24), searches beyond mythic history into mythic *natural* history, situating himself at the origin of both scientific *and* cultural models. Last reflux to archaic beginnings, Bachelard is also, for Serres, the herald of a new Classicism (p. 27). In a surprising historicist move, Serres draws on this reading of Bachelard to assert that 'times have shifted' to formalism. For him, Bachelard's works reveal that 'the world of symbols has been exhaustively covered'(p. 25), that archetypes have been filled-up to their extreme limit, leaving a clean slate to modern formalisms.

[26] Michel Serres, 'Estime', *Hermès IV, La distribution* [hereafter *H4.* All translations mine] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), p. 278.

reductionism was one of the projects he took up in *the System of Leibniz and its Mathematical Models*.

2. Expression

> It is true that the division (*le partage*) between interpretation and formalization presses upon us and dominates us today. But it is not rigorous enough: the fork it forms has not been driven far enough down into our culture, *its two branches are too contemporaneous for us to be able to say even that it is prescribing a simple option or that it is inviting us to choose* between the past, which believed in sense (*croyait au sens*), and the present (the future), which has discovered the signifier (*le signifiant*). In fact, it is a matter of two correlative techniques whose common ground of possibility is formed by the being of language, as it was constituted on the threshold of the modern age.[27]

Le système de Leibniz et ses modèles mathématiques, Serres explains in his lengthy introduction, aims at elucidating Leibniz's 'system,' not as comprehensive totality, but from the point of view of its formal organisation, its *systematicity*. Although he was extremely prolific, Leibniz did not produce a definite philosophical system. 'Leibniz constructed a system, which means a space, but he never made a book, which means a line pursued from bottom to end, […] except from narrow and synoptic opusculae, where he indefinitely repeated himself'.[28] A polymath, he exercised numerous roles, not only different scientific disciplines and professions; he also worked for houses with inimical faiths and opposite interests. According to Serres, Leibniz always sought harmony in method and organisation, throughout all his intellectual activities, diverse as they were. As he observes, Leibniz endlessly repeats that '[in his work], everything conspires, agrees and concur,'[29] pointing towards a unity, of which he never revealed the key. Grasping this fuzzy totality would be an infinite task, if there were no organisational clues coming *from within* Leibniz's writings, which Serres describes as follows:

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[27] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1970), p. 326. Translation modified.
[28] *SL*, p. 1.
[29] *SL*, p. 2.

> Fortunately, Leibniz's system is made so that, incessantly and in a single movement, it constructs itself and speaks of itself, it forms itself and describes its formation, that it interlaces, if I may say, its semantics and its syntax. And the latter's nature, continuous discourse on the organisation and internal to the organisation itself, is such that it renders this infinite task terminable.[30]

There is a linguistics[31] of organisation within Leibniz's formal discourse which is both self-reflexive and applicable to the whole, as each region of the system distributively expresses the totality.[32] Stated otherwise, there is a language of forms, a series of quasi-formal 'transversal laws ' which hold for all domains of the system. Leibniz himself mentioned these laws as 'blind or symbolic knowledge,'[33] admitting the existence of an ordering force beyond the purview of 'subjective' judgement. These 'formal notions,' which belong 'in fact or virtually ' to Leibniz's discourse, should not be viewed as 'universal keys,' but only as punctual references in each context.[34] It is at this crucial point that Serres reintroduces the concepts of 'structure' and 'model' in almost exactly the same terms as he had done in his 1961 programme. 'Structure' and 'models' together, Serres affirms, constitute his 'methodic path'[35] to read Leibniz's system: the former is to the latter as the contours of an image on tracing paper, a precise drawing of its formal articulations. Serres' ambition is to *demonstrate* Leibniz's system by laying out its structural organisation.

As I undertake to show in this chapter, the concept translation is cardinal to this demonstration. Above all, translation is an operator of systematicity: it connects, relates, transposes, transports forms through different regions of the system, through different 'multiplicities'. The 'system' has at least two meanings: on the one hand, it designates a *systematic* or *structural* whole, a methodic network of theses, on the other hand, it refers to Leibniz's *metaphysical* system, or system of preestablished harmony,

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[30] *SL*, p. 3.

[31] From the beginning, Serres introduces a complex variety of linguistic markers (semantics, syntax, discourse, laws, index), which inform Serres' own methodic language. This constant appeal to linguistic notions reveal Serres' project to 'de-logicize' Leibniz's system through the use of a systematicity derived from, but not coterminous with, the study of language.

[32] Here, Serres introduces the principle of monadic distribution through expression before explaining its function in Leibniz's philosophy. This probably constitutes one of the strongest aspects of Serres' theoretical undertakings, which is to combine the monadic production of generality with his structuralist method: 'the system of harmony marks the introduction of structural method in philosophy.' (*SL*, p. 5)

[33] *SL*, p. 4.

[34] *SL*, p. 3.

[35] *SL*, p. 62.

which constitutes an *expressive* and *historical* whole. For the demonstration to hold, these two systems need to be rigorously thought together, not merely superimposed, but interweaved and *translated* into one another.

Methodic Pluralism

One of Serres' central claims in *The System of Leibniz* is that his structural reconstruction of the Leibnizian system is strictly deducible from Leibniz's own pluralism of method.[36] Unlike Descartes or Spinoza, Leibniz discriminates between coherence and deduction[37]; 'rigor persists, but ways vary.'[38] For Leibniz, the problem of systematicity is not only logical; it is architectural and topographical.[39] As Serres tirelessly shows throughout his thesis, 'understanding the Leibnizian system requires to lay out, on a space of representation, what we habitually dispose along a sequence.'[40]Leibniz' systematicity, Serres claims, is both multilinear and multivalent. Whilst 'multilinearity' designates the plurality of *logical* or sequential orders stemming from a given notion, 'multivalence' refers to the *analogical* valence of orders, laws or forms through different regions of the system.[41] As Serres argues, each intersection of this complex network can be represented by a star:[42]

> Each region of these networks is figured by a kind of starred knot, (or 'summit') of which each thread […] crosses and joins all or part of the whole of the other summits […] Leibniz has always tended to multiply these junctions and

[36] The principle of methodic pluralism is at the core of Serres' reading of Leibniz, but it is also, as the next chapter will show, a key component of Serres' own philosophical project. See: Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*, transl. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 91.

[37] *SL,* p. 11.

[38] *SL,* p. 9.

[39] Finding one's way in this system requires relying on two different perspectives: scenography and ichnography. While *scenography* designates the view intrinsic to the path undertaken, *ichnography*, (an architectural expression to designate a plan from above) corresponds to a map, a view from above, a synoptic presentation. Serres' spatialization of Leibiniz's system is corroborated by Leibniz's own consistent use of topographical images: Ariane's thread in the labyrinth, tapistry, weaving, stars.

[40] *SL,* p. 31.

[41] *SL,* p. 16.

[42] For Serres, the star is the paramount model of the Leibnizian *complicatio*, which itself came from neo-platonism and esoterism. It is a rigorous image of the monad: 'A singular problem, a notion or an order has the same situation in the system as a thing of the world in the universe it describes, constructs or expresses: in the same way as one can read the entire universe in the monad, as we can decipher the marvels enveloped in the folds of its virtualities, we can read on this problem, on this notion or order, a starred knot which distributively leads to all the others.' *SL*, p. 28.

> crossings, to relate each point to all the others by the greatest amount of paths, or even all the possible paths: combination, composition, expression, conspiration.[43]

Leibniz's *méthode des Etablissements* is another chief point of Serres' demonstration. Whereas Descartes' method supposes a *tabula rasa*, requiring the understanding all of A to posit B, Leibniz proceeds by a method of 'establishments', a pattern of suppositions established under conditional certainty and opened to later demonstration.[44] Since these movements of *return* or retroactive demonstrations are pivotal to Leibniz's conception of scientific proof, his systematic constructions prove to be fundamentally reversible. Substituting itself for the method of certainty, Leibniz's *Ars inveniendi* confers an *open* character to the system that is crucial for Serres to highlight.

> That there is no absolute beginning means that we can start by anything, according to the level arbitrarily chosen [...] Whether we start by divine unity and creation, monad or worldly aggregate, from the logical simple or the origin of knowing, the notion of force or of harmony, moral or juridical theory, the general conception of history, etc., There is no 'entry' that Leibniz himself did not practice, that he did not one day posit as principle.[45]

From this all-encompassing viewpoint, Serres intends to 'harmonically' reconcile various interpretations of Leibniz (Couturat, Belaval, Guéroult, Brunschvicg, Cassirer, etc.) as different trajectories within the same network. Each of these paths amounts to giving a particular emphasis on the whole from its selective standpoint.[46] Taken together they compose a *multilingual dictionary into Leibniz's system*.[47] Serres' relation to Louis Couturat's works is of particular significance here. Also drawing on mathematical models, Couturat's *La logique de Leibniz* had argued for a *reducibility* of Leibniz's entire metaphysics to its logics: 'the metaphysics of Leibniz uniquely relies on the principles of logics, and entirely proceeds from them.'[48] Serres on the contrary considers that mathematics should not function as the metalanguage of the system, it is not the ultimate principle of explanation of Leibniz's philosophy. The crucial tension

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[43] *SL*, p. 14.

[44] Serres contrasts the double-ended movement of Leibniz's demonstrations with Descartes' unidirectional 'chain' of deduction in various places. *SL*, pp. 117-124; 133.

[45] *SL,* p. 25.

[46] *SL,* pp. 26-7.

[47] Serres thus replicates the structure of Leibniz's systematicity at the level of the scholarship *on* Leibniz.

[48] Louis Couturat, *La logique de Leibniz, d'après des documents inédits* (Paris, Félix Alcan, [1901] 1961), p. x.

here is that for a great part of his life Leibniz himself was looking for an elementary science of order, epitomized by his unsuccessful attempt to find a 'universal mathematics' or *mathesis universalis* (the infamous 'Leibnizian dream'). It is in fact from Leibniz's *failure* to find a single logical plane of totalization and synthesis, from his forced multivalence, that Serres' project unfolds.[49] There is a gap, Serres argues, between Leibniz's *hope* to find a universal order, and the system as it is actually realised in Leibniz's archive.[50] 'We do not consider the general organisation, as it should be in right, or as Leibniz sometimes hoped it, but as it is, in fact, realised. The result seems in fact richer and more profound than the "dream pursued".'[51] According to Serres, the mathematical ordering of the world was not Leibniz's starting point, but his 'final goal, constantly postponed', its 'receding horizon'.[52] In the absence of a definitive keystone to his life-project, the *mathesis universalis*, failing to reach completion, was dispersed throughout a multiplicity of 'samples' (*échantillons*), which Serres endeavours to link together and reorganise.[53]

Serres' commentary relies on a (regressive) move from Leibniz's philosophical claims to Leibniz's general *method*, which presents itself as a subterranean network organising his researches. At its root, this method comes down to a 'general theory of multiplicities' in a sense strikingly close to that which can be found in modern set theory.[54] Serres underscores that Leibniz always *starts* from a given multiplicity, that his point of departure is invariably serial or aggregative.[55] Leibniz's pluralism of method, Serres argues, comes *before* his ontological pluralism: it is a set *strategy* (*une stratégie ensembliste*). [56] For Serres, the Monadology is not so much a theory of substance as a discourse on the *primitive* or the elementary.

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[49] *SL*, p. 29.
[50] *SL*, p. 28.
[51] *SL*, p. 29.
[52] *SL*, p. 29.
[53] *SL*, p. 29.
[54] The interpretation of Leibniz's oeuvre as an 'anticipation ' of set theory is the oscillating horizon of Serres' own project: 'In Leibniz', Serres writes, 'there are as many pluralisms as one wants: ontological, mathematical, pneumatical, sociological, encyclopedic, methodic, what else. *Could this be* a general theory of sets, hesitating between the finite and the infinite, the discreet and the continuous for reasons that we have finally discovered?' *SL*, p. 32. Emphasis mine.
[55] *SL*, pp. 33-4. Emphasis mine.
[56] Michel Serres, 'Leibniz retraduit en langue mathématique', *Hermès III, La traduction* [hereafter *H3*. All translations mine.] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 113. Emphasis mine.

Although displaced in the more 'subterranean' realm of multiplicities and methodic pluralism, the problem of Leibniz's relationship to mathematics (as method, as model, as heuristic or imaginative principle) is not easily resolvable. Between 1961 and 1968, Serres considerably transformed his initial problematic of 'importation' into an acentric conception of the sciences, revoking the supremacy he earlier ascribed to mathematical formalism. Here formalism is not presented as a historical stage to be recovered in the Classical age, but as a reference system (a language) chosen for its simplicity. Models constitute 'simplified elements of comparison', 'more transparent, more evocative than other possible indexes.'[57] More importantly, mathematics itself constitutes a *system*, a model of organisation. It serves twice as a model: by providing particular examples and as a sample of organisation.'[58] As Serres undercores, Leibniz's starting point is a plurality of rigorous domains, starting from the heterogeneity of mathematics themselves.[59] Leibniz was 'preoccupied with importing the distributive whole of the mathematical encyclopedia in the treatment of all questions.'[60] This constitutes the first principle of universality of his system: 'the iteration of the methodic whole in each possible place (*lieu*) *suffices* to rigour.' [61] Serres summarizes this general meta-theoretical endeavour by the symmetric formula: *the model of system is the system of models*.[62] From this formula we need to retain the co-presence of the one and the multiple: this ideal system of relations can only be *one* system by and through the organisation of a *plurality* of models. The wager of Serres' doctoral dissertation is, indeed, the unravelling of a *formalism without reductionism*.

Serres' demonstration is divided into two parts: 'Stars' and 'The language of schemas' (first and second parts of the three-part book). The first part engages us in a first voyage within Leibniz's system from the 'starred knot' of two metaphysical theories: the theory of representation and the theory of history. As their relationships with mathematical models need to be *proven*, these two 'summits' have been chosen, Serres explains, for their greatest *distance* to possible mathematization.[63] The second part (of which initial chapter is titled 'inverted stars') takes the *inverse* route: from

[57] *SL*, p. 63.
[58] *SL*, p. 69.
[59] *SL*, p. 94.
[60] *SL*, pp. 94-5.
[61] *SL*, p. 95. Emphasis mine.
[62] *SL*, p. 37.
[63] *SL*, p. 71.

mathematical models *to* metaphysical problems. At the centre of his exegesis, the *Monadology* articulates the two parts together: as Serres reminds us in different occasions, the Monadology or the system of preestablished harmony constitutes the 'most elementary mesh of the system', it is the intersection point between mathematics and metaphysics. In this two-way demonstration, translation designates both the way in which specific metaphysical theses and mathematical models are *analogically transported*, *transposed*, *replicated* from one region to another (= translation of forms) and the way the entire mathematical region is translated into the metaphysical realm, and *vice versa* (= translation of languages).[64] This translational unity of the system, grounded in Serres' theory of models, is a replica, an 'imitation', of the functioning of Leibniz's metaphysics of *communication* and *expression*.

The *Monadology*'s Relational Nexus

Leibniz indifferently referred to his metaphysical system as the 'system of preestablished harmony', the 'Monadology'[65] and the 'system of the communication of substances'. Each of these expressions contains a sufficient description of his metaphysical system, yet viewed under different perspectives: that of God, that of the substances, and that of inter-monadic relations. Although Serres emphasizes the necessary acentric character of his commentary, he regularly comes back to the system of harmony, which he interprets as its 'methodic centre', and conducts multiple analyses of the *Monadology*, considered as its most achieved -and chronologically latest- presentation. The Monadology renders Serres' structural account of Leibniz's philosophy non-arbitrary: as we will see, it articulates together Leibniz's 'own' metaphysical *system* with Serres' *structural* account of it.

The ninety paragraphs of the *Monadology* open on the problem of the co-dependence of the one and the multiple, according to the principle of composition. A monad is simple, hence indecomposable, it is the absolute beginning (*ontological beginning*) of Leibniz's

[64] Nevertheless, it is important to underline that the term 'translation' is only *gradually* introduced in the thesis, in association with the progressive unfolding of the Leibnizian theory of expression.

[65] I will hereafter use '*Monadology* ' to refer to Leibniz's text, and 'Monadology' to refer to the *system* itself, wherever it appears in Leibniz's corpus. To the extent that the latter can be argued to derive from the former, this distinction is not always obvious.

meditation (§1). Yet the monad is only given to experience through composition, or aggregation: its *phenomenal beginning* is that of the multiple.[66] We are confronted, according to Serres, with four primary orders: the order of *being* (monad), the order of *phenomena* (multiplicity), the order of *constitution* (composition) and the order of *reason* ('the multiple is made of simples'), which immediately induce that '[t]here is not one and only one beginning, but a group of priorities closed onto itself' which form a squared diagramme.[67] It also indicates that Leibniz's monad is the space of deployment of the philosophical problem of the one and the multiple.

Without parts, hence without windows enabling exchanges between their interior and exterior (§1-7), monads can only be created at once and with their internal principle of change (§11). They emerge directly from God's creation, as 'continual Fulgurations' (§47).[68] The first relational order is therefore that of creation or creational causation. However, monads also configure another network of relations, which is the general connexion (*liaison*) of all created beings.

> §56. Now this connexion or adaptation of all created things to each and of each to all, means that each simple substance has relations which express all the others, and, consequently, that it is a perpetual living mirror of the universe.[69]

According to the doctrine of preestablished harmony, Creation is not only the coming into being of discreet substances, but also that of their regulated becoming, hence of the integrality of their relations. Thus, although monads are mutually independent from one another, their dependency vis-à-vis God suffices to establish their intercommunication.[70] The universal 'expressivity' of monads depends on their capacity to perceive, to represent 'a multiplicity in a unit (*unité*)' (§14),[71] hence 'everything that exists, perceives'[72]. Thus, Serres explains, expression establishes the community of all monads, their communication, and, reciprocally, the world as 'the reunion or the intersection of monadic representations.'[73] Each monad's specific

[66] *SL*, p. 294.
[67] *SL*, pp. 296-7.
[68] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *The Monadology and other philosophical writings*, trans. Robert Latta, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), p. 243.
[69] Ibid., p. 248.
[70] Michel Serres, 'La communication substantielle démontrée *more mathematico*', *H1*, p. 154.
[71] Leibniz, *The Monadology*, p. 224.
[72] *SL*, p. 97.
[73] *SL*, p. 147. Emphasis mine.

expression depends on its particular location, its *situs* or point of view. The *situs* determines the spectrum of represented or reflected entities, while the type of substance under consideration determines its relative distinctness. 'Each 'form' represents its proper body, its department, the world of God, following a gradation from distinct to confused that corresponds precisely to its situation in the graduated chain of existing entities.'[74] An expression of the totality of the universe, each monad is a centre of 'external' relations (of expression, reflection and communication), which are themselves 'internal' to perception. As Serres argues, the monad results from the 'metaphysical requisite of two opposed types of multiplicity': the discrete multiplicity of the universe, and the continuous multiplicity of perception.

> As atom of nature or element of things, it is at the limit of the analytical process (*in ratione*) of the decomposition of the diverse; as solitary individual, it is at the limit of the totalization process of variances of subjective intimacy. Therefore, the spiritualization of the universe is a thesis rendered necessary by the thesis of the universal representation of the monad; centre of everything, point of concourse of the omnitude of things, although foreclosed and closed, it is also everywhere dense and everywhere distributed. This double duality of the one and the multiple, this crossed (*croisée*) conception of the monad in elementary extension and in totalising comprehension, frees Leibniz from the labyrinthic difficulties encountered by Plato, when addressing the same problem in the hypotheses of the Parmenides; and this, *by applying the region of the object and the region of subjectivity one onto the other*. The one is indissolubly requisite of a cosmology and centre of perception.[75]

Through 'expression', 'perception' and 'communication', the objective and the subjective regions are confounded in a single figure: the monad is a 'subject-object' insofar as in it, 'all the "objective" elements are inverse and the limit of the "subjective" elements [*tous les éléments 'objectifs' sont inverses et limites des éléments 'subjectifs'*].'[76] Serres' starred network is not superimposed, but rigorously *implied* by Leibniz's method of systematicity. Inversely, the starred-structure of models '*imitates*, in the architectonics, the worldly situation of the perceiving soul, it *expresses* it under the aspect of method,'[77] we will now see in what ways.

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[74] *SL,* p. 146.
[75] *SL*, pp. 297-8.
[76] *SL*, p. 387.
[77] *SL*, pp. 100-1. Emphasis mine.

Representation

> […] the *theory of expression* is the methodic *organon* of the pluralism of significant contents, or, in our language, the general theory of correspondences.[78]

The first chapter, 'Representative multiplicities', takes representation as a multilinear point of departure into different, and combined, mathematical models.[79] Since Leibniz considered the understanding as a tablet (*tabula*) on which past and future predicates are written from origin, 'representation' covered a broad spectrum of meanings. Leibniz's theory of representation encompasses at the same time perception (dreaming, listening, seeing), knowledge and demonstration. All these activities, Serres claims, are characterized by a passage *from confusion to truth*. If the understanding is a palimpsest, knowledge essentially becomes an operation of *decipherment*. 'Representative multiplicities' examines these various strata of 'representation' from the 'infra-conscious' to (true) knowledge as successive operations of decoding. As for the other chapters of *The System of Leibniz*, the primitive concept of Leibniz's theory of representation is 'multiplicity'. Perception for instance is defined as 'a certain attitude towards the element in general, letter, note, number, trace, mark […].'[80] For Leibniz, every multiplicity is at once confused representation and *implicated*, complete knowledge.[81] 'Our palimpsest', Serres writes, is both pure multiplicity and 'inchoative mathematics.'[82]

In this chapter, Serres shows that Leibniz developed his theory of knowledge through a plurality of mathematical models, such as the theory of primary numbers and algebra.

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[78] *SL*, pp. 393-4.

[79] The first section, which addresses representation in general, draws on the movement, in mathematical reasoning, from combinatorial to algebraic arithmetic. The second section tackles Leibniz's conception of perception through geometry, looking more specifically at the transition from Euclidian, to arguesian (projective) geometry. The third and final section of this chapter looks at the *petites perceptions* from the standpoint of differential calculus.

[80] *SL*, p. 107.

[81] Emphasis mine. Serres, following Leibniz, consistently draws on the etymology of the word 'implication ' (in its verb -and not its derivative- form). The Latin *Implicare* means to enfold, to entwine, to envelop. Taken to its etymological roots, 'implication' does not have (yet) the meaning of 'consequence' ('→') but precisely the reverse: the *en*folding and not *un*folding of a form or a sequence. It stands, rather, as the exact opposite of 'explication' (etymologically: unfold, unwind, develop). Deleuze elaborates on this key distinction in the introduction of *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 12.

[82] *SL*, pp. 110-1.

Just as one can produce the totality of derivatives from the combination of primary numbers,[83] Leibniz considered that knowledge could be obtained through a double operation of reduction and combination. Leibniz invariably drew on the analogy between *calculus* and *reasoning*, and between 'the *divisibility* of numbers and the *analysis* of concepts.'[84] For him, resolving an equation came down to reproducing the operations of perception, but *via* symbols: application of successive filters, progressive 'decomposition of the cryptogramme, extraction of the resolving element.'[85] According to Serres, the algebraic model is to combinatorics as knowledge is to perception. The movement leading from the petites perception to actual knowledge is a cycle of impression-expression,[86] ranging from elementary correspondence (e.g. perception) to structural analogy (e.g. mind-body correspondence), or, in mathematical terms, from point-to-point correspondence (or elementary application) to *function*.[87] Yet, the notion of function itself relies on a 'more general and profound notion of *regulated correspondence* between any elements belonging to given multiplicities.'[88] At bottom, establishing such a correspondence between multiplicities amounts to finding their 'law of connexion.'[89]

It is evident that Serres considers all mathematical models from the viewpoint of a theory of multiplicities, which eases the passages and translation between them. This 'formalism of multiplicities' pivots on the notion of *series*, a key term in XVIIth century mathematics. Fundamentally, a series is at the same time 'an aggregate *and* a law of order.'[90] For Serres, the diverse relations of these multiplicities to their *law* or 'interior connexion' is the true kernel of Leibniz's philosophy. They rely on the largest array of *variations* of the principle of identity.[91] As it moves between different regions of the system, *correspondence* encompasses 'unity, identity, equality, parallelism, equivalence under a point of view, invariant in a variation, similitude, congruence, analogy,

[83] *SL*, p. 141.
[84] *SL*, p. 143.
[85] *SL*, p. 144.
[86] As Deleuze observes, Leibniz makes it clear that 'the relation from petite perception to conscious perception is not that of part to whole, but from *ordinary* to *remarkable* or *notable*: 'what is remarkable must be composed of parts that are not so.' Gilles Deleuze, *Le pli - Leibniz et le baroque.* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1988), p. 117. Translation mine.
[87] *SL*, p. 149.
[88] *SL*, p. 45.
[89] *SL*, p. 149.
[90] *SL*, p. 31.
[91] *SL*, p. 44.

correspondence, concourse, image, expression, harmony, alliance or reconciliation, sometimes uniformity.'[92] Therefore, the theory of expression is, mathematically speaking, a theory of correspondence between series.

Law of Expression

One of Leibniz's fundamental descriptions of expression is to be found in a 1678 letter to Arnauld:

> A thing expresses another, in my language, when there is a constant and regulated relation (*rapport*) between what can be said from the one and the other. And so a projection of perspective expresses its geometral. *Expression is common to all forms*.[93]

As Serres contends, the statement that 'expression is common to all forms' is equivocal. Depending on the way the term 'form' is understood, it can either be a metaphysical claim or a linguistic one. In the first place, 'all forms' designates all *substances*. Expression refers to the correspondence 'each-all' and 'all-each' in Monadic inter-expression. As it determines all objects of the world, and *constitutes* the universe as such, it is universal. 'Universality is not grasped here in terms of *implication* (totality concentrated in the individual), but in terms of *application or relation in general*'.[94] In this sense, expression is not common to all forms because it is instantiated in each of them, but because it 'constitutes their community of communication: it is a relation constitutive of the universe, and the universal of relation.'[95]

In the second place, 'form' designates '*any given note, sign, character, or mark*'[96]. In this second sense, expression means the 'general legislation of the signified', which, common to all formal elements, ensures the unity of the 'universe of discourse'.[97] As Serres insists, this search for the 'legislation of the signified' is a universal principle of Leibnizianism, which does not only hold for the relationship between mathematical

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[92] *SL*, p. 41.
[93] Leibniz, Letter to Arnauld (Sept.-Oct. 1678) quoted in Michel Serres, *SL*, p. 145. Emphasis mine.
[94] *SL*, p. 146. Emphasis mine.
[95] *SL*, pp. 146-7.
[96] *SL*, p. 147. Emphasis mine.
[97] Ibid.

disciplines, but also configures the linguistic field in general. In so far as the universe of discourse and the world of things respond to the same law of regulated correspondence or multiple-multiple relations, the system of expression as a metaphysical form of relationality and as a linguistic one can be *applied* onto one another. According to Serres, the Leibnizian structure has to be interpreted at the same time as a metaphysical and as a semantic *expressive totality*.

Point at Infinity: Monad and Monadology

It is in geometry that this system of regulated correspondences finds its most powerful figuration. Pre-established harmony, Serres argues, can be diagrammatically figured as a space made of parallel 'geodesics' (curved lines), of independent series of multiplicities, each of these multiplicities having its own internal principle of organisation:

> All these multiplicities are organised, within themselves, in such way that each suffices to explain the world in its genre. All these multiplicities are parallel and parallelism is, naturally, a scheme of separation and analogy, any two given sequences never encountering each other (as the series of monadic solitude), but enjoying the same direction. In other words, it is the best diagram to represent the pluralism of the *Sames as essentially Others*, or the *Others as essentially Same*, which means the maximum identity in ontological difference, and the maximum of difference in legislating identity; it is the elementary structure of the space of similitude.[98]

On this diagrammatic representation, the individual monad is a point, and any given point 'can be conceived as an intersection of as many straight lines as we want'[99] Thus, at this point, the actual sequences of the world converge, 'it is a miniature of the universe, expressing the universe following the relation multiple-one.'[100] However, this ichnographic presentation of the world,[101] only available from the standpoint of God, fundamentally opposes itself to the perspective of the monad: each monad is situated at the centre of a cone and at the *convergence* of a beam of straight lines. How is it possible, Serres then asks, to pass from the monad to the Monadology, to conciliate representation and truth, scenographies and ichnography?

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[98] *SL*, p. 152.
[99] *SL*, p. 154.
[100] *SL*, p. 155.
[101] See *Infra*, note 39, p. 99,

According to Serres, this perennial quandary of Leibniz scholarship can be solved based on the developments, pioneering in Leibniz's times, of Girard Desargues' (1591-1661) *Projective Geometry*, and of Blaise Pascal's (and Leibniz's own) studies of conic sections.[102] Desargues' principle states that *whenever two straight lines concur in a single point, or are all parallel, all these lines are said of same order (de même ordre) or of same ordinance*. Parallelism can thus be considered a 'unique kind of convergence'[103], intersecting at a *point at infinity*. Serres supports his analysis with Leibniz's own assertion that '[t]he difference existing between the apparition of bodies for us and their apparition to God is in a certain way (*quodammodo*) the one that exists between scenography and ichnography.' [104] Any two given points, although they do not 'communicate in the finite', express one another: 'they are in preestablished harmony, which means that they are established in the originary infinity.'[105] There is a single law of representation (the world as ichnography), which contains an infinity of punctual perspectives or scenographies. Serres thus claims that 'the laws of the infinite are hence explicatory of the monadic laws; the relation between the world of creatures and God is analogous to that holding between a plan of finite distance and the elements at infinity.' [106] Desargues' theory mathematically solves the problem of resemblance previously highlighted, offering the point at infinity as the final law of all resemblances.

At this point, we are in full grasp of Leibniz's system as an 'exemplary structure'. However, its ultimate *law* of organisation seems to remain out of reach, in the 'geometral of all perspective' –in God. This is where Serres performs his master stroke, by offering a second interpretation of classical theories of perspective (of the conic sections in particular). Through the theory of perspective, Serres at once *proves* Leibniz's metaphysical system and elaborates a radically *de-theologized* version of it. According to Serres, the study of conic section can be grasped as another variation of

[102] The famous study of conic section pioneered by Desargues and Pascal appears as another variation of the principle of regression to a law of connexion, or law of order, in the treatment of multiplicities. From an ellipse, a parabole or an hyperbole, there is a point to unify their perspectives: 'the science of conic section shows that a point exists, from which the apparent disorder organises itself in real harmony.' (*SL*, p. 244) Such a point designates 'the minimal hypothesis that orders (*ordonnance*) a plurality in disorder in the most direct way.' *SL*, p. 249, note 2.

[103] *SL*, pp. 153-4.

[104] Leibniz, Letter to Des Bosses (5 February 1712), quoted in *SL*, p. 153.

[105] *SL*, p. 155.

[106] *SL*, p. 156.

the principle of regression to a law of connexion, or law of order, in the treatment of multiplicities. From an ellipse, a parabole or an hyperbole, there is a point to unify their perspectives: 'the science of conic section shows that a point exists, from which the apparent disorder organises itself in real harmony.'[107] However, this point is not *external* to the multiplicity it configures, since this point is everywhere:

> God is the centre of perspective situated everywhere, *i.e.* non situated. […] Thus he does not occupy a central point, a point that does not exist, but all points at once: it is the zero of distance and the density of distribution, it thus totalises the whole of variations from centre to centre of finite knowledge. To put oneself in God's place is therefore rigorously meaningless; what is meaningful, on the contrary, is the pluralist ideal to vary as much as possible, to have the quickest and the longest run within the gnoseological space of these points. While the XVIIth century is looking for a fixed point, an insurance and an anchor, Leibniz maximally broadens the encyclopaedic space: two ways to join the divine 'place'. [108]

From monad to Monadology, the aim is not to find an 'impossible geometral of all points of views' as what is *aimed from* each of them. The issue is to grasp 'the geometral *formed* by the totality of these points'.[109] God is everywhere. 'Ichnographic' totalization is not itself a point but a *movement*, that of the variations from one centre of finite knowledge to another. Beyond the traditional ubiquity, Serres argues, Leibniz's 'repletive ubiety', is a filled-up spatiality: it is 'the "spatial manner" in which God is eternal'[110]. In a rigorous anti-foundational way, Serres *grounds* Leibniz's systematicity in this decentering.

Mathematics and Metaphysics

Reconstituting Leibniz's systematicity requires us to rethink the relation between its method and its philosophy, its mathematics and its metaphysics. Since Dietrich Mahnke,[111] one of the most enduring problems of Leibniz's scholarship had been the articulation between his *mathesis universalis* and his metaphysics of the individual. How can the real individual, 'isolated and foreclosed', and the 'relational universal, of

[107] *SL*, p. 244.
[108] *SL*, pp. 251-2.
[109] *SL*, p. 252.
[110] *SL*, p. 252.
[111] Dietrich Mahnke *Leibnizens Synthese von Universalmathematik und Individualmetaphysik* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann (Holzboog), [1925] 1964).

the mathematical type'[112] find a synthesis? In his recent researches on the *mathesis universalis*, David Rabouin has argued that mathematical interpretations of Leibniz's system (either logicist or, as Serres, structuralist) have neglected the distinction made by Leibniz between the metaphysical order, or *real* unity, and its *representative* unity, itself ruled by a 'logics of imagination'.[113] Rabouin argues:

> On the one hand, we should not try to make mathematics depend from a logical *lingua universalis* […] On the other hand, we should not derive from mathematics the 'models' of a 'system', that *precisely relies on the gap between what does fall under imagination and what does not*.[114]

Arguably, Serres does not fall prey to such criticism by avoiding any straightforward connexion between Leibniz's metaphysical system (his idea of metaphyics) and specific mathematical models under scrutiny. In fact, the concept of translation reproduces this very chasm at the centre of Serres' book. The *application* of models is one more enactment of *correspondence* between disjointed realities. For Serres, the reunion between mathesis and metaphysics is, precisely, a *translation*; its 'real' synthesis, as we have just seen, is only projected at a point at infinity.[115] This is especially clear in the case of the *Monadology*, which Serres approaches through a succession of models but always fails to reach. Serres starts from a series of mathematical models (arithmetic, geometric, physical, living beings), of which the last and 'strongest' version is combinatorics. [116] Combinatorics, Serres claims, 'is a Monadology with formal monads.'[117] Yet combinatorics and all the models taken from classical mathematics can only account for the combination or aggregation of discrete multiplicities, where relations hold *externally*.'[118] Their logic belongs to what Leibniz calls 'the logic of imagination', which, grounded in mathematical logics, can only conceive of empty

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[112] *SL*, p. 528.

[113] As he reminds us, Leibniz himself admitted that 'if the use of mathesis wonderfully succeeds in the domains that can fall under the eye, in those that are not submitted to the imagination we have, until now, worked with a lesser success.' Excerpt from *Elementa Rationis*, quoted in David Rabouin, 'Logique, mathématique et imagination dans la philosophie de Leibniz ', *Corpus* 49, (2005)

[114] Ibid., Emphasis mine. We immediately recognize in this second option, the strategy developed by Serres.

[115] We could thus argue that Serres evades the problem posed by Rabouin by relying on mathematics that are only *inchoately* present in Leibniz's works, projecting Twentieth-century mathematics back onto Leibniz.

[116] *SL*, p. 332. Combinatorics designates at once a particular mathematical model and a family of models.

[117] *SL*, p. 335.

[118] *SL*, p. 334.

forms, discontinuous entities and approximations. Since the monadic world is full and dense, yet diverse and discernible, since it proceeds by continuous and gradual change and thus belongs to the domain of the qualitative, its best models are not *intuitable*. Because it is located at the limit of the world of interiority and that of exteriority, the monadological world can only be grasped by harmonic approximation. Its continuous fullness can only modelled upon a mathematics of the infinite,[119] by 'superposition of geometries' (Euclidian, analytical, arguesian, analysis situs), or by totalization of different models.[120]

In his search for the Monadology's scientific model, Serres also considers applied sciences such as biology or physics. We know that Leeuwenhoek and his discovery of 'animalcules', protozoans and bacteria through the invention of a new microscope were held by Leibniz as an 'ocular witness of his own thought.'[121] In his study of infinitesimal animals, the Dutch scientist had showed that the infra-sensible world was perpetually transforming and entirely differentiated at the same time. It provided Leibniz's metaphysics with a kind of experimental counterpart. However, Serres stresses that although influenced by Leeuwenhoek, Leibniz *radicalised* his findings through *mathematical generalisation* and *infinite iteration*. His metaphysics is not only made of infinite encasements (*emboîtements*), where matter is everywhere dense, but its *orders* of existence are themselves encased within one another: the Leibnizian world is 'everywhere mechanical, everywhere organic, everywhere animated, everywhere spiritual, automaton, soul; at the extremity of this layering of infinite densities, what is actually only left of matter is *pure limitation*.'[122] At the level of individual monads this pure spiritual limitation can be grasped as a set of limits between inverse characters: a monad is closed and open, without windows but reflecting the world, active and passive, spirit and matter, primitive force and inertia.[123] As Serres argues, the 'absolute

[119] E.g. the theories of 'rational, irrational and transcendental numbers.' *SL*, p. 343.
[120] *SL*, p. 351.
[121] *SL*, p. 354.
[122] *SL*, p. 364.
[123] *SL*, p. 385. Serres completes this series of oppositions in other sections of the book: 'interior-exterior, motor-mobile, absolute-relative, primitive-derivative, unique-multiple, simple-complex, invariant-variable.' (*SL*, p. 789) This structure of inversion is grasped in its greatest arithmetic and spatial purity by Leibniz's 'harmonic trangle', perhaps the most potent of all the variations of its models, which Serres would later fully analyse, in 'Système et synthèse,' *H3*, pp. 120-133. I have reproduced the schema included in the latter (p. 128) below. Serres shows that in the course of his mathematical researches, Leibniz transformed Pascal's arithmetical triangle by redoubling it, starting from its summit, with its mirroring image in

monadic reality encapsulates everything that can occur between something and its limiting inverse', between any position and its negation.[124] Passing through the multitude of its models without being entirely grasped by any of them, Serres claims that the Monadology constitutes an impossible point towards which every science converges, which gathers them harmonically.

> The pure meditation on the one and the multiple, analysis and composition, can thus be *translated in several positive languages.* [...] Therefore, the language that metaphysics speaks, that of the *Monadology*, is precisely the universal language, from which all the others are only particular projections in singular domains, epistemologically assignable; it expresses, in fact, all their syntax and all their semantics at the same time; it even allows to consider them as respective translations from one another [...] And thus, we consider that the Leibnizian project to form a language that obeys the norms that we have just announced – everywhere considered as a dream – has succeeded: the *Monadology* is written in this very language.[125]

Metaphysics can only be reached via a universal language, of which universality does not depend on a primitive or adamic state, but on its density: this language can express all languages.[126] Just as the *true* element 'monad' is discovered at the intersection of all

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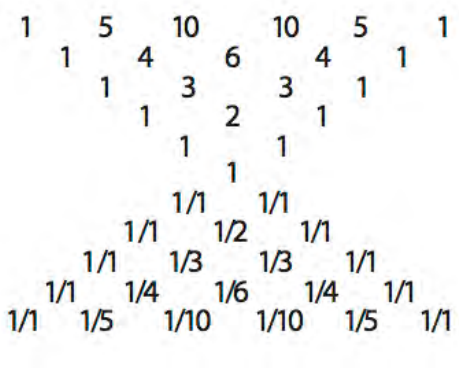
fractions. On the one hand, Serres contends that Leibniz's harmonic triangle constitutes a literal *figuration* of the *mathesis*, by representing a complete, well-saturated, beautiful, hence harmonic, multiplicity. All numbers are different from one another, yet each of them has a relation to the whole, since its very position on the net contains the whole definition. It is made of an 'order of orders, like a space-time' (p. 129). On the other hand, the harmonic triangle can be interpreted as an image of the Monad: we can draw a horizontal line in its middle, which figures a limit and a harmonic connexion. Whilst the numbers mirror one another, as in the series of the soul and the body, the limit also stands for the monad itself, which figures the limit between exteriority (the communication of all substances in the order of the cosmos) and the internal infinite perceptions that mirrors the latter. Through this figural translation from the *mathesis* to the monad, Serres writes, 'the harmonic connexion of the soul and the body, of the individual and the world' is 'explicated, which means unfolded into sequences of simplicities' (p. 131).



[124] *SL*, p. 386.
[125] *SL*, p. 392.
[126] Cf *supra*: Chapter V, pp. 204-207.

methodic languages, the *Monadology* is also grasped as a pure index, which only appears in the mutual short-circuiting of all intentions.

> Although the real is remote from us, sometimes infinitely, the task remains, in order to be veridical, to constitute the concourse and agreement of discourses that speak of it, each holding a voice in the contrapuntic convergence. When we speak, when we write, we invincibly indicate a real, even if our point of view is remote or laid astray; and the more we designate it, the closer we are to the language of languages, that of *Monadology*: as if, in the vicinity of the thing diversely expressible, we could meet the totality of the aiming lines.[127]

We cannot but remark the striking proximity between this formulation and Walter Benjamin's conception of *reine Sprache*. Universal language (in Serres) and pure language (in Benjamin) are *aimed at* through translational variation, as their convergence or total short-circuiting. For both authors, translational variations constitute a contrapuntal web, which is a *structure* for the apparition of truth only in so far as it is a continual *movement* between languages.

[127] *SL*, p. 539.

Dictionaries

If the *Monadology* emerges from the translations between the positive languages of the Encyclopedia, Leibniz's system, it turns out, is not just a system of expression but also a system of *generalised translatability*. As Serres would summarize in *Hermès III, La Traduction*, Leibniz's metaphysics of harmony is 'a supple, indefinite and complicated system of translation of theses', in other words, a 'network of correspondance ensuring the universal possibility of all translation of any thematic into any other'[128]. The strength of Serres' argumentation regarding this passage from expression to translation relies on showing that Leibniz himself had initially conceived harmony as a form of translational correspondance through combinatorial art and the notion of a multilingual dictionary. The *De Arte Combinatoria*, which Leibniz wrote at age nineteen, had already laid the grounds of a life-long reflection on variation, invariants, and the relations between multiplicities. The *De Arte* is a 'treatise of tabulation in general,'[129] where 'combinatorics is applied according to a quasi complete horizon of human doctrines'[130] -including numbers, syllogicisms, genealogical trees, words, musical notes, etc. Combinatorial art can therefore be conceived as Leibniz's own method for exploring *all the possible relations* between two multiplicities.[131]

Leibniz named each of these synoptic tables 'harmonia'. Combinatorial tables possessed a certain regime of universality in their formal structure, which he unfolded throughout his life, under the name of 'harmony'. Harmonic tables can thus be considered as 'images, scattered throughout the encyclopedia, of the metaphysical notion of preestablished harmony'.[132] As exhaustive projections of possible relations between multiplicities, harmonic tables are schemes of preestablishment, but they are also dictionaries: '[…] a dictionary establishes constant and regulated relations (*rapports*) between two or more multiplicities: it is a realisation, in the field of

[128] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 80.
[129] *SL*, p. 435.
[130] *SL*, p. 422
[131] According to Serres, the *De Arte* thus constitutes a 'logical architecture of multiplicities', laying the ground, as its subtitle claims, to the 'elements of a Logics of Invention' (*Logicae Inventionis semina*). Therefore, Serres writes '[…] a generalised *De Arte*, completed by the mathematical works written after the travel to Paris constitutes the best grid of reading of the great synoptic texts of the end.' (*SL*, p. 410)
[132] *SL*, p. 445.

language, of the theory of correspondences.'[133] Unsurpisingly, Leibniz had himself used the notion of harmonic tables when projecting to produce multilingual dictionaries. The latter were constructed on the one-multiple relation, associating, for a given letter, the variety of sounds that different languages ascribed to them, and for a given sound, the corresponding writing expressions.[134] The theme of the multilingual dictionary is important to Serres as it constitutes an evocative 'analogon' for his structural method. The relation between different languages is what best approaches the 'language of models', *i.e.* the relationship holding between models:

> In general, the explanation by *models* is an explanation by *dictionaries*, by correspondences from language to language, each being an interpretation of the system, so that the encyclopedia is the set of all the interpretations of the system, which constitutes their [the models'] shared syntax.[135]

As Serres argues, any given system of correspondence cannot suffice *per se*, as a description of the whole system; these schemas of preestablishment do not lead to a totalitarian 'pan-logicism', 'pan-psychism', or 'pan-mechanism'.[136] Each reference is self-sufficient and yet translatable into another. Like the monad in the space of similitude, each 'regional language is isolated; forming a closed system and a legal domain. […] Each of them is parallel and similar to any other, indefinitely ready to translation.' [137] We encounter anew the language of monadological materiality, qualitatively full and harmonic, and the isomorphic relation between the metaphysical and the mathematical. The use of concepts of 'languages', 'dictionaries' and 'translation' imposes itself as soon as we try to capture at the same time the complete autonomy of each system of explanation, and their relative insufficiency in relation to the whole. The text of the *Monadology* presents itself as a discourse to be decoded through combinatorial art and through several disciplines (arithmetic, algebra, logics, technology, biology, etc.); it therefore implies the existence of a 'system of faithful translations'. In other words, Serres reads Leibniz's *Monadology* itself as a proof of harmony by translational correspondence.

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[133] *SL*, p. 408.
[134] *SL*, p. 532.
[135] *SL*, p. 532. Emphasis and parenthesis mine.
[136] *SL*, p. 520.
[137] *SL*, p. 533.

> What is the System? It is a set of theses, substitutable or translatable, salva veritate. The truth of harmonic relations one-multiple traverses the distance from the formal to the real.[138]

By reading the *Monadology* transversally, Serres acknolwedges that Leibniz's system of expression relies on harmony as *precondition*. In other words, 'translation, far from relying on a primary separation, proves, through its possibility, that it establishes itself on a primary convergence, on a primordial or pre-established harmony.'[139] Serres interprets harmony as a divine guarantee, which brings theory of science and genesis of knowing together. Hence, 'the system of harmony presents itself as the assurance that there exists a perfect dictionary, leveling the correspondances between the world-book and the table-comprehension, the divine language and the particular languages of our twists and points of view [...]'[140] It constitutes, according to Serres, Leibniz's own 'transcendental'.

The Monadology is both the condition of all multiplicities, and the closure of the loop, and as Serres shows 'the cycle of linguistic modulations' can ultimately be resolved in identity.[141] Since the world is nothing else than monads themselves, monadic interexpression constitutes a cycle, and all their expressions are reducible to God.[142] 'The Monadology closes onto itself as an *achieved cycle* of similitude and *perfect dictionary*.'[143] *The System of Leibniz*, however, does not end there, in divine resolution. Serres' aim is not to provide us with a faithful exegesis that would reinscribe Leibniz's thinking in the register of faith; his project is one of reactualization. We reach here the point at which Serres' systematic reconstruction starts to deviate from Leibniz's own system. In the two following sections, I propose to unravel the role of the concept of translation in this process, through Serres' emphasis on method, movement, and temporal incompleteness.

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[138] *SL*., p. 536. Emphasis mine.
[139] *SL*, p. 639.
[140] *SL*, p. 543. Emphasis mine.
[141] *SL*, pp. 602-3.
[142] *SL*, p. 625.
[143] *SL*, p. 643. Emphasis mine.

3. Transport

In a world characterized by generalised inter-expression, any translation is necessarily an analogical development. A translation of a given figure or discourse is what repeats, reconfigures, transports its law, its logics or form: 'only *form* is importable-exportable.'[144] In a harmonically structured world, 'to translate is to *retrieve* what is already there.'[145] Translations ideally function as a closed circuit of substitutions where identity is *conserved*.[146] In this sense, translation is dominated by a scheme of return, cycle and repetition, it predominantly hinges on the *legal*.[147] Translation assumes its role of validating transdisciplinary methods within the Leibnizian encyclopedia as a legalized interplay of languages. But as regulated correspondence or proportionate development, translation also introduces a gap in the relation of identity; it embodies the relation of identity *as* variation. Two sentences, two model or two forms have many ways to retain their analogy, different ways in which translation both conserves and transforms a certain law.[148] In other words, translation brings into light the slight *warping* (*gauchissement*)[149] introduced into identity by expression, configuring the Leibnizian world as a *non-identical whole*. The universality of the system, Serres contends, is at once univocal and equivocal, depending on whether we choose to read it through the 'key of identity' or the 'key of difference'. In other words, Serres' reactualization of Leibnizian systematicity relies on his introduction of translation as a double-edged concept, *i.e*, as a scheme of return or closure and as a scheme of non-teleological variation.

Indeed, in its very semantic determination, translation naturally exceeds the legal domain by embodying the *transport* of forms, laws and models across the encyclopedia. In this sense, translation embodies the passage to the *positive*. Leibniz's total system cannot be demonstrated without the fulfillment of its formal apparatus or otherwise

[144] *SL*, p. 639. Emphasis mine.
[145] *SL*, p. 640.
[146] The term 'conservation' is cardinal here as it connects Serres' Leibnizian reflections on identity to his analysis of information. See *supra*, p. 160.
[147] See : Michel Serres, *Hermès II, L'interférence* [hereafter *H2*] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1972), p. 141.
[148] *SL*, p. 59.
[149] *SL*, p. 601.

than through encyclopedic *saturation*.[150] As the book progresses and as the linguistic terminology proliferates (language, dictionary, translation), Serres doubles Leibniz's movement towards metaphysics by a movement from syntax to semantics. Whilst the system of models designates the general *syntax* of the system,[151] its *semantics* is constituted by the *totality* of the encyclopedia. Serres thus conceptualises, in the lineaments of Leibniz's oeuvre, the relationship between truth and quantifiers from the standpoint of comprehensive (or concrete) universality and convergence. Against a bleak logic of truth-values, truth is not to be ascribed, but discovered from within (and by totalization of) the plurality of images that the world delivers. Truth is a function of multilinear convergence (not a matter of binary possibility) of the greatest amount of paths. Indeed, as the *Monadology* establishes, only systematicity *and* perspective, order *and* variety, lead to perfection:

> §58. And by this means there is obtained as great variety as possible, along with the greatest possible order; that is to say, it is the way to get as much perfection as possible.[152]

In this journey from methodology to ontology and towards the end of his book, Serres progressively replaces the structural concept of 'model' with the theological notion of 'image'. Theologically paramount, since in the originary relationship between God and His images lies the source of all analogies and all translations, the image also imposes itself as a mode of *philosophizing*. Serres emphasis on the concept of image manifests his determination to extract a more radical anti-reductionism from Leibniz's thought.

The Balance of Universalities : Local and Global I

As Serres shows, the temporally closed cycle of pre-establishement is not the only form of universality that we can derive from Leibniz's systematicity. From the standpoint of the theory of knowledge, universality can be considered as a *telos* that the practice of philosophy posits *ahead of itself*. This *telos*, which is itself harmonic, is alternatively

[150] *SL*, p. 636.
[151] As Serres indicates in 'Les anamnèses mathématiques': 'Couturat, Russel and others had attempted to write the grammar of this language, its syntax and morphology; what remained to be done was to establish the semantic of the system, which means to constitute the dictionary.' *H1*, p. 81.
[152] Leibniz, *The Monadology*, p. 249.

conceived as a limit or as an equilibrium. As a result, knowledge crucially relies on *both* an intensive, and an extensive form of universality:

> Who am I, I who thinks? The more I think, *the less I am me*, the more I am a point of concourse of these interrelations, a unit of this converging multiplicity of consciences, the more I am the formal universal of communication. Or further, *the more I am me*, situated, singular, but as I clarify my singularities I approach the middle (*milieu*) of universal communication, the place without place (*lieu sans lieu*) from which the scenographies of a problem are confounded into ichnography. My knowledge is a *balance* between the universal of my singular understanding and the extensive universal of communication.[153]

The activity of thinking leads me to myself and beyond myself; there is no cut between these two outcomes, which reveal perfectly reciprocal.[154] The universal appears from within the embedded situation of the individual in its singularities,[155] not as inherence but through reflection. Such a universality is not merely mathematical and extensive; it is also and fundamentally, metaphysical and comprehensive. Leibniz avoids choosing between scenography and ichnography; he instead retains these disjointed elements of reflection in a dynamic and unresolvable tension. As Serres writes:

> Scenography is a diminished plan, if we consider confusion, but enriched on the contrary, if I distinctly know the law of points of view, the rule of their distribution. The universal is more and less than the singular: it is more in extension, less in comprehension. The whole of Leibinz's philosophy consists in *balancing these two decisions*, to maintain them together.[156]

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[153] *SL*, p. 527. Emphasis mine.

[154] In *Phenomenology of Perception,* Merleau-Ponty formulated the idea of a perspectival *reciprocity* in the following way: 'We have here a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in consummate reciprocity. Our perspectives merge into each other, and we co-exist through a common world. In the present dialogue, I am freed from myself, for the other person's thoughts are certainly his; they are not of my making, though I do grasp them the moment they come into being, or even anticipate them. And indeed, the objection which my interlocutor raises to what I say draws from my thoughts which I had no idea I possessed, so that at the same time that I lend him thoughts, he reciprocates by making me think too. It is only retrospectively, when I have withdrawn from the dialogue and am recalling it that I am able to reintegrate it into my life and make of it an episode of my private history, and that the other recedes into his absence, or, in so far as her remains present for me, is felt as a threat.' Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 413.

[155] 'The proposition 'to think an object from' a given point is one of pure Leibnizian gnoseology […] there is no cogito that is free from situation. The site is condition of vision, of expression, of perception […] ' *SL*, p. 770.

[156] *SL*, p. 521.

It is only from *within* the complexity of its own methodic or epistemological pluralism that Leibniz's philosophy forms itself. Leibniz's method produces a certain regime of universality, which is anything but *static*: it is the contingent stability of a set of signs, elements, demonstrations, it is a transversal cut, a certain 'establishment [...] method does not require completion, it needs establishment, it has nothing to do with linearity, it requires interrelation.'[157] Serres shows that universality is essentially dependent on movement and disequilibrium: only the passage from one *situs* to another, only the understanding of each topography's specific lineaments, can provide a comprehensive universality. The passage from local sample to global law is realised through a change of referentials. Importantly, this fundamental *destabilisation* of reference implies that any given term can hold as *exemplary*. Any term can express the law of the series it is a part of, any examplar is a moment in a development, which it expresses and envelops. This second passage from the local to the global, often designated as 'philosophy of the example' or alternatively, 'method by models' (thereby justifying the project of Serres as a whole) proposes to engage each part as 'total part'. Thus, Serres argues, the example becomes a 'concrete universal' such as an *image*: 'every image is monadic, every monad is image, monadic philosophy is understood through models, the philosophy of models is understood through monads.'[158]

Through the metaphysics of preestablished harmony the system remains closed, its termination (*achèvement*) is *behind*.[159] Through its method however, its *achèvement* is projected into the future, opening it up to the winds of history. For the *equilibrium* between mathematics and metaphysics to hold, for the system to be true, Leibniz relies on an essential *disequilibrium* of references, on an unrestricted plurality of languages. In his study of Leibniz's expression, Serres thus moves from a combinatorial scheme of translation (multiplicities, dictionaries, elements) to a perspectival or qualitative one (localized, perceptual) by adopting different viewpoints on systematicity. Journeying

[157] *SL*, p. 553.

[158] *SL*, p. 638. In particular, Serres' analysis of harmonic tables enable him to develop a reading of this rigorous expressive totality through the notion of image: the divinely preestablished table is an image, of which mathematical predemonstrations are the images : images in the second degree. Then the translation of these images in the encyclopedia, in the realm of positive knowledge, becomes an image of an image , an expression in the third degree. (*SL*, p. 518) As Delco summarizes: 'The system of Leibniz is a labyrinth of prismatic accords between exemplary and disparate singularities.' Alessandro Delco, *Morphologies: à partir du premier Serres* (Paris: Editions Kimé, 1998), p. 92.

[159] *SL*, p. 641.

through the encyclopedia does not only mean laying out its cartographies, it also means 'consenting to lose oneself' in the system, in the labyrinth of its references.[160] It amounts to privileging a scenographic and experiential perspective, rather than ichnographic or total view. Present throughout, the idea of journeying within the system's 'paths' of systematicity will reveal to be the pivot of Serres creative 'deviation' from Leibniz.

Infinite Iteration

> It is not anymore through the philosophy of no; it is not anymore through alienation, through agonistic, or through transgression; it is not anymore, finally, through the bias of negativity, in general, that we should grasp the reactivation of the Platonic question of the other and the same. We should look further than these romantic references, as each is glued in the univocity of a meaning. We need a shift of the epistemological attitude, a certain relativist revolution that, suddenly, liberates us from references.[161]

A 'balance' mechanism is only a contingent, fleeting state of equilibrium in disequilibrium, and suggests more than the mere equipollence of universalities that we have just presented. In the last part of his book 'The Fixed Point', Serres analyses anew Leibniz's ideal architecture from the perspective of the relationships between knowledge and infinity. A crucial objective of this confrontation is to interpret Leibniz's philosophy as an inversion of priorities between the finite and the infinite, as well as between rest and movement; an inversion through which Serres' own philosophy starts to emerge. The resort of such inversion lies in the extraction of a full-blown *theory of reference* from Leibniz's system. In doing so, Serres shows us that this theory of reference (and not the set of metaphysical principles Leibniz derived from it) is the true condition of his system. This can be read as Serres' own elaboration on the paramount structural theme of the acentricity of structure,[162] and it proves pivotal to

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[160] 'And, suddenly, it is impossible not to realise that one is standing, without having intended to, in a forest of metaphysical parabolas, a forest that is inextricable enough to lose oneself in a labyrinth of images that respond to one another without apparent order. The imaginary world of models is as complex as the real world. One must, without hesitation, consent to lose oneself in it.' *SL*, p. 174.

[161] Michel Serres, 'L'interférence monadique; le point fixe et l'intersubjectivité', in *H2*, p. 147.

[162] For instance, Derrida in 'Structure, Sign, Play ', insists on the question of the centre: 'This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality) the totality has its center elsewhere.

his structuralist reactualization of Leibniz's metaphysics. In this section we shall see that the concept of translation developed in the course of *the System of Leibniz* articulates itself as a general philosophy of knowledge (*philosophie du connaître*) and plays a central role in Serres' re-thinking of the Kantian transcendental.

For Serres, Leibniz's theory of reference is the result of the latter's engagement with what he names the 'ante-copernician question'. This problem, which, according to Serres, precedes and overshadows the birth of the subject, emerged from the debates surrounding the irruption of new kinds of infinity in Seventeenth-century sciences.[163] While Classical geometry and mechanics regarded the determination of the centre (of movement, of gravity, of perspective) as fundamental, this calculation posed irresolvable difficulties as soon as it did not apply to a closed or limited realm. As a result, the conundrum posed by the establishment of the centre of a non-finite movement traverses all cosmological theories of the age.[164] This forces us, Serres argues, to rethink the whole Kantian scheme through the problematic of the possibility of a *fixed point*, which he formulates as follows: 'whatever the nature or the qualification of reference, does it exist and how to find it?'[165].

In order to grasp the originality of Leibniz's response, Serres contrasts it to that of Blaise Pascal (1623-1662), one of Leibniz's crucial sources of inspiration. Serres organises this comparison around the concept of the *point*, pivotal in both cases. As for Leibniz, Arguésian geometry and the problem of perspective are at the crux of Pascal's thought. Man, whose only access to the world relies on specific, perspectival situations, is everywhere at the centre of a decentered universe, without access to any fixed point or self-evident anchor from which to judge, from which to reason. This situation engages man in uncontrollable currents, as Pascal writes: 'We sail within a vast sphere, ever drifting in uncertainty, driven from end to end. When we think to attach ourselves to any point and to fasten to it, it wavers and leaves us; and if we follow it, it eludes our

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The center is not the center.' In *Writing and Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 352.

[163] See: Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1957)

[164] Serres claims that whilst in Copernicus, Képler and Tycho Brahé, the establishment of a central point to the universe is always tied to finitude, in Nicolas de Cues, Bruno, Pascal and Leibniz, 'decentration and infinitude are invariably associated' *SL*, p. 650.

[165] *SL*, p. 663. Emphasis mine.

grasp, slips past us, and vanishes forever.'[166] As Serres claims, this loss of a fixed point is not the effect of an absence, but of a saturation of centres, which immediately *relativizes* any position: as the sun and the earth are only the 'pole of a narrow and partial canton, I, too, am only an apparent middle.'[167] Whilst Arguesian geometry represents the possibility to legislate over the 'orderless varieties' of the Euclydian space,[168] the natural world provides none of these 'differentiating sites', or too many.[169] Therefore, Pascal interprets this proliferation of centres as an *impossibility to know* in the world of contingency, which remains desperately homogeneous and undifferentiated. For him, our quest for order and differentiation could only find satisfaction through charity, *i.e*. in Jesus-Christ, mediator and union of the two natures, unique 'centre of history, of the Scriptures, of people'.[170] 'To recover the centre, we need a *change of space*, we need to move from nature to supernature (*surnature*), *to leave the world*.'[171] For Serres, this shift marks the divorce between philosophy and natural philosophy: the cosmos henceforth ceased to be the object of philosophy, to become its model, its 'paradigm.'[172]

Leibniz's engagement with the problem of the fixed point takes a very different form to Pascal's. Instead of longing for the lost unity of knowledge, Leibniz takes up *infinite iteration* as a basic 'structure of reasoning'. As previously seen, the fixed point can be a *caput variationis*, a point of origin, a point of view, a zero-point or a limit-point, thus any point can function as an 'elementary reference from which a certain order is thinkable.'[173] Like Pascal, Leibniz realized that we have innumerable referentials at our disposal, and that, if the universe presents itself as the collection of possible references, none of them is *universal* and the world remains regulated by a hypothetical type of necessity.[174] The circuits of hypotheses run in every direction, but the 'radical origin', sufficient cause or primary reference resides beyond the chains propagations of reason, outside of space and time. 'However, reason requires an absolute necessity [...]

[166] Blaise Pascal, §72 'Man's Disproportion ', *Pensées*, (Paris: Flammarion Poche, 1993).
[167] *SL*, p. 682.
[168] *SL*, p. 693.
[169] *SL*., p. 697.
[170] *SL*, pp. 702-3.
[171] *SL*, p. 704. Emphasis mine.
[172] *SL*, p. 706.
[173] *SL*, p. 740.
[174] *SL*, p. 750.

independent and anhypothetical, refered to itself as primary and supreme instance.'[175] Whilst infinite iteration never reaches the domain of metaphysics, it defines it *negatively*. 'True monads', Serres writes, 'are neither material nor mathematical, they escape phenomenal division, geometrical decomposition, etc., all infinitely iterable processes and thereby failing to grasp them.' [176] Monads are indeed *posited* as 'elements' in so far as they function as stopping points of all regressions. The metaphysical realm is defined through the abolition of reference, signalled by the closure of the monad onto itself. And yet, such closure does not amount to a sheer leap of faith: the crux of Serres' demonstration is to show that whilst metaphysical truth depends on this *interruption* of reference, this interruption remains related, in a dialectical way, to the universe as infinite iteration.

Leibniz's space is everywhere homogeneous and polarized, filled up with centres that are alike and yet differ from one another.[177] Through monads, the cosmic space can be everywhere centered and everywhere decentered: '[...] the monad resides at the convenance and at the concourse, in a ponctual place where problems and realities entangle (*se nouent*). And the "place of no other place" (*lieu d'aucun autre lieu*) is everywhere.' [178] Although infinitely complex, although made of 'infinities infinitely replicated', this saturated universe finds its *order*. Instead of redrawing the partition between the divine and the created world, Leibniz applies the two spaces onto one another. He maintains the continuity between the two worlds by considering that the 'true point of view of things' is of the *same ordinance* as our own.[179] Confronted with a series of hypotheses, translations or variations, Leibniz's aim is not to distinguish the true from the false, but to find their common law. [180] Furthermore, Serres recasts the Kantian transposition of the Copernician revolution to the rank of a 'mythical tale'[181] through a reflection on diverging modes of philosophical translation. What Kant presented as the importation of a scientific paradigm into philosophy only concerned

[175] *SL*, p. 790.
[176] *SL*, p. 761.
[177] *SL*, p. 722.
[178] *SL*, p. 721.
[179] *SL*, p. 809.
[180] Serres indeed writes: 'If the problem was to export in philosophy, to introduce in philosophy, to apply in philosophy this or that scientific paradigm, it would not be the content of the paradigm that would be transported, as we translate it in a language specific to philosophy, but the law from which it is itself an application, the section or the profile.' *SL*, p. 638.
[181] *SL*, p. 712.

one of its momentary images. For Leibniz, Copernicus did not cancel out Ptolemy as they both elected *a* centre. Leibniz 'deciphers their languages as two different languages designating a single meaning, translatable into one another by a common law: the translation (*translation* in French) from centre to centre.' [182] The law of infinite iteration suspends Leibniz's decision, and the importation of the Copernician revolution into philosophy is immediately relativized. Thus for Leibniz, Serres writes, ' […] idealism and realism are two theses without distance, […] realism and idealism are equivalent per substitution'[183] The Kantian birth of the subject is reduced to the arbitrariness of a decision in the tradition's infinite translation of theses.

For Serres, the transcendental itself needs to be rethought through this generalised perspectivism. In Leibniz's philosophy, thought does not adhere to a subject but roots itself into a specific location, situs or situation, which functions as the *condition* of any vision.[184] The monadic situs can be grasped as 'the pure condition of the limits of a certain type of omniscience.'[185] As a consequence, 'the critical question extends to space, as a set of points, sites, collection of all conditions, as collection of all possible references. '[186] The problem of the fixed point thus delineates '*the conditional space of an existing or possible world,* which means of any thinkable world.'[187] Monads are these 'fixed points' in reference to which 'everything is derivative'. Yet, Serres stresses, 'these points are everywhere, and they are all different.'[188] The 'objective-transcendental realm' uncovered defines, according to Serres, a pluralism in rigour. Such pluralism is not like any pluralism, it is '*the fundamental answer that makes possible the pluralism of the answers to every question,*'[189] or, as he puts it in *Hermès II, L'interférence*, an 'epistemological pluralism'.

As it runs through the system of Leibniz, the concept of translation acquires new and unexpected meanings as well as retaining old ones. As we have seen, the regression to a law, the transport of a law (which are the main ways in which translation is defined) is

[182] *SL*, p. 634.
[183] *SL*, p. 637.
[184] *SL*, p. 770.
[185] *SL*, p. 771.
[186] *SL*, p. 773,
[187] *SL*, p. 774.
[188] *SL*, p. 772.
[189] Ibid.

not limited to language or linguistic components. A law of a series, a *caput variationis* in a combinatorial table, a model, a form, a point, a reference are all potential 'laws' around which Leibniz operates variations. A 'translation' can be realized starting from any fixed or self-identical point, form or element. In fact, the main characteristic of 'variation' is *plurality*, and translation at its purest would be a certain relation leading from a one to a multiple, a *pluralisation of form itself*, where each translation belonging to this new plurality still reflects its 'origin' and carries its 'law' within itself. This way, Serres takes advantage of the fact that the term 'translation' encompasses both process and result, or movement and reflection. Defining the transport of laws, forms, models across regions, translation assumes the highly complex function of *analogy* in Leibniz's system, embodying the distantiation between the divine and the fallen worlds, between, in Benjamin's terms, 'pure language' and 'the language of man'. Yet this distance does not produce a desperate longing for a lost unity, but becomes principle of knowledge, in the form of a method. The space of translations is labyrinthic and entirely immanent to the contingent world, yet it replicates everywhere the basic structure of analogy, between our knowledge and God's understanding, between our points of view and truth itself. For Leibniz, the highest attainable knowledge is the truth of our *method*, of the way we connect, deduce, cause, derive, express, communicate.

In contrast to Pascal, Leibniz transmutes the relativity of reference into an optimistic engagement with the diversity and changing facets of the world: myriad of ways to attain the divine sumptuousness.[190] But as Serres shows, translation (as analogy or transversal view) retains a profoundly ambivalent character in its capacity to convey knowledge. It embodies the possibility of moving beyond the specificity of viewpoints, of methodic languages and to reach the invariable laws underlying them. In this sense it is the vector of metaphysical truth. But as a movement of trespassing of frontiers, this access to true knowledge is also pictured as a risk-taking. For the philosopher, any translation from domain to domain risks indeed to fall on the side of a *metabasis*, an undue or abusive conflation of domains. Leibniz formulates this cleary in his reflection on the point:

[190] *SL*, p. 719 & p. 725.

> Formerly, when my philosophy was not really ripen, I located the Souls in points, and I thought that their multiplication was explicable by Translation, since from a single point one can produce a multiplicity of them, just as from the summit of a triangle one can produce by division, the summits of a multiplicity of triangles. But I became more circumspect… thinking that in this there was a sort of μετάβασις είς ἄλλο γένος [transition to another species]. To say that souls are intelligent points is not exact enough an expression. If I talk about them as centres or concentrations of external things, I speak by analogy.[191]

Lack of rigour or vector of knowledge? The system, as Leibniz himself perceived, is accompanied by an inevitable noise, a possibility of betrayal through subtle categorical exchanges, misjudgement induced by imaginistic correspondances, risk of overgeneralisation by analogy. The monad is a metaphysical 'point' in many different ways at the same time, 'from dynamics to perspective, from representation to autonomy,'[192] but the separation of these registers is necessary to clarify the monadic world as a set of differentiated spaces of references, which are all absolute and conditional, all dependent and independent from one another.[193] This is where the concept of translation imposes itself, not only as a more secular, but also as a more *precise* category than analogy: translation maintains together the conjunctive movement (the trans- or the meta-) and the distinction of languages, as its enduring condition.

From Amphiboly to Translation

> [T]he famous Leibniz constructed an intellectual system of the world, or rather believed himself able to cognize the inner constitution of things by comparing all objects only with the understanding and the abstract formal concepts of its thinking.[194]

The problem of reference does not only lead, as we have seen, to a number of metaphysical and theological questions, it also enables Serres to start developping the short-lived, yet crucial, concept of an 'objective-transcendental field.'[195] Through this

[191] Leibniz, *Phil*, II, 372 and *Phil* VI, 627, quoted by Serres in *SL*, p. 759.
[192] *SL*, p. 748.
[193] *SL*, p. 748.
[194] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999) [A 270/B 326], p. 372.
[195] This concept was developed in the early 1960s, principally in *L'interférence*, but it also appears in *the System of Leibniz*, for instance (p. 400 & p. 544). For a detailed analysis of this notion, see Anne Crahay, *Michel Serres: la mutation du cogito : genèse du transcendantal objectif* (Bruxelles, De Boeck Supérieur, 1988)

concept, Serres proposes to reactualize Leibniz's relational fabric into the contemporary idiom of the theory of information, a thread of continuity of the *Hermès* books.[196] The viability of a 'Leibnizian structuralism' or the possibility of a *philosophically strong* version of structuralism depends on this specification: what is the ontological status of the network of interexpression or intercommunication? And the entire dissertation precisely draws on this movement of progressive incarnation or fulfilling of the abstract structure postulated in the beginning. 'The connexion from methodology to ontology […] is the systematic theme of leibnizianism, from philosophy to the encyclopedia; it is also the only theme of this book.'[197] Such a 'fulfillment,' it appears, decisively rests on the possibility of rethinking the relation of Leibniz's system to the *empirical*.

The penultimate section of *the System of Leibniz*, 'the Space and the Point: Formal Aesthetics and the Transcendental Problem' can be read as a direct response to Kant's famous 'Remark to the amphiboly of the concepts of reflection'. For Serres, the status of the point and of space in Leibniz's works reveals the system's fundamental ambiguity towards the empirical world.[198] Leibniz sometimes conceives the mathematical point from the standpoint of extension, i.e. as an attribute of space: as an 'infinitesimal' or 'infinitely small line'. At other times, he defines it in more traditional mathematical terms, as what is 'strictly unextended, indivisible, discontinuous', 'the place of no other place' (*lieu de nul autre lieu*).[199] Hence, the point encapsulates two conflicting 'movements of thought,'[200] which correspond to two types of mathematics: the first is oriented towards its *application* to concrete phenomena whilst the second is aiming towards metaphysical reality and depends on the principles of uncreated logics[201]. On

[196] In this passage, the 'transcendental' itself acts as a vanishing mediator: Serres ceased to use this expression from 1968 onwards, when the system of possible knowledge became the system of actual transport and thus when the thrust of his analysis shifted from an abstract modality to a concrete one.

[197] *SL*, n°1, p. 626. 'Au *De Arte Combinatoria*, le système est fini une première fois : pour la méthode, pour la forme vide, pour le symbole et le canevas ; à la Monadologie, le voici achevé encore, par saturation de sens régionaux et de sens philosophique.' *SL*, p. 636.

[198] Here, 'empirical' is not to be taken in a rigorous, or historical sense, but rather as what aims at the created world, by opposition to what stems from uncreated logics. The empirical is less a general philosophical orientation than an index of distinction between analogical worlds.

[199] *SL*, p. 776.

[200] *SL*, p. 775.

[201] 'Mathematics would therefore be the place where the abstraction process, stemming from a certain experience, ends. At the same time it is the field upon which metaphysics dictates its conditions, within understanding. Consequently this justifies our body of method through

that account, Serres confirms the fundamental 'amphiboly' of Leibniz as confusion between the pure object of the understanding and the phenomenon.[202]

Coming back on this question in *La Traduction*, however, Serres takes up the amphiboly as a positive feature of the system. Leibniz did not separate the transcendental from the logical, yet in his works originated two systematic forms able to reconstitute the Kantian architectonic: a *system* and a *morphology*. Leibniz's first methodic path (the form 'system') relies on sets, elements and relations.[203] For any given collection of elements the idea is to find their optimal principle of organisation or, in other words, the best *shortcut* to seize a given multiplicity.[204] In this first sense, Leibniz was resolutely formalist: he was in search of a universal language conceived as a *perfect* system of communications:

> Throughout his entire life he sought for the universal language, or the language of languages [...]. He canonized all of these trials in a metaphysics where calculus equates creation, where the immense wholeness of the real is expressed by a maximally pure discourse in which substances [...] communicate in a perfect manner. Yes, pre-established harmony is an isomorphic thesis with the paradox of a soundless message which transports, nobody knows how, the clamour of the real [...][205]

In the second sense of the 'system', the determining factor is not the logical connexion of its steps but the *intensity of its connectedness*. System means a 'strongly connected variety' (*variété fortement connexe*), which means decomposable into strongly connected compositions.'[206] It is directed to the natural reality insofar as the latter is essentially characterized, for Leibniz, by fullness and continuity. It is by drawing on these connexions that Leibniz invented the *analysis situs* and founded topology, where he created an entirely new mathematical lexicon dedicated to *varieties* (accumulation, vicinity, limits), able to attend to complex varieties such as life itself. This morphology

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multiple translations in a domain more complex and heterogeneous than it seems at first, although fitted with a systematic unity.' *SL*, p. 777.

[202] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* [A270/B326], p. 371. According to Serres, Leibniz's primary limitation in his understanding of the transcendental was due to his conception of this space as *space* of the possible. The determination of the *totality* of the possible, as the actual, responds to the law of non-contradiction or principle of radical exteriority. As a consequence, 'The question of the fixed point remains a transcendental question, but it is still attached, in Leibnizianism, to pure logics.' *SL*, p. 780.

[203] Michel Serres, 'Leibniz retraduit en langue mathématique', *H3*, p. 113.

[204] Ibid., p. 117.

[205] Ibid., p. 116.

[206] Ibid.

embodies 'structure' in its primitive meaning of 'construction', as the best possible occupation of space.[207] And the *Monadology*, Serres reminds us, constitutes the canonical example of this 'global morphology of interaction' searched for by Leibniz.[208] This attention for continuous transformations and connexions as well as for discontinuity and frontiers can be grasped as a 'general theory of borders (*bords*),'[209] hence as an *aesthetic*:

> [T]he project of an *anexact-rigourous* morphology of the varieties of the living is naturally not separable from an aesthetic in the traditional sense. Topology is or involves an aesthetic, just as the logico-algebraic whole is or involves an analytic. As soon as Leibniz possesses the two meanings of the term system, he laterally announces Kant's distinctions, and directly announces our own science.[210]

Between these two mathematics, combinatorics functioned as an 'organ of liaison' (*organe de liaison*).[211] As Vera Bühlmann puts it, Serres shows that Leibniz's 'structural amphiboly is not a malfunction or failure inherent to Leibniz's philosophy (in so far as it aspires to be systematic), but quite the inverse, that it is essential for it.'[212] Whilst in the first sense of system, mathematics presents itself as a maximally pure language, in the second sense, the universality of mathematics does not stem from purity, but from saturation: mathematics 'does not describe reality, it speaks reality: it collects reality, it comprehends reality.'[213] The distinction between *purity* and *saturation* is absolutely cardinal. It enables us to see where Serres' philosophy in fact detaches itself from a certain structuralism, building upon these 'new mathematics' (rather than on the algebraic structures).[214] Hence, as the next chapter will show, his move away from structuralism proceeded from a shift of emphasis *within mathematics* and *within the*

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[207] Ibid., p. 118.
[208] Ibid., p. 117.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid., pp. 119-120.
[211] Ibid., p. 111. This was not a new discovery for Serres, but the reframing and rewording of some of the results of the dissertation in different terms. In *The System of Leibniz*, Serres had realised a table showing how combinatorics and its different subordinated models led the path to a 'theory of transformation in general '. (*SL*, p. 287.)
[212] Vera Bühlmann, 'Arché, Arcanum and Articulation. What is at stake with the notion of the universal?', *Monad oïkos nomos*, http://monasandnomos.org
[213] Ibid.
[214] Here my interpretation diverges from Bühlmann in so far as she interprets this 'morphology ' as a *new* mathematical organon that simply overrules the first model. In my view, however, Serres remains profoundly pluralist in so far as he maintains the first model. There are two *mathesis universalis* (formal and pure on the one hand, concrete and saturated, on another) of which the exchanges and the translations open the space of philosophy.

sciences (in particular from algebra to topology, from mathematics to physics), a transition, without which the singularity of his passage to 'post-structuralism' would remain relatively opaque.

Perspectivist Universalism

The System of Leibniz, beyond the virtuosity of the technical exercise involved in the analysis of Leibniz's system through its mathematics, aims at questioning the validity, or the 'legality' of the importation of mathematics into other domains, thus posing a key question, through Leibniz, to Structuralism as a whole: what are the limits of the mathematization of the real, what can formalism do when it attends to cultural contents, or even, to life or experience? Which importations are 'legitimate' and can we 'regulate' them at all? These questions, although specifically framed here in relation to mathematics, have broader implications. Beyond mathematics, they concern the 'expressivity' of any theoretical language, or the possibility of universality in discourse. Serres does not address this question critically, but structurally, architectonically and, to a certain degree, speculatively. In Serres' view, the universality of discourse is conditioned upon epistemological pluralism, in the same way as the universal characteristic depends on a plurality of languages.

Analysing the production of universality in Leibniz's system, Serres provides us with a *double scheme of universality*. The first corresponds to a notion of transversality or analogy through a series of variations or translations. It relies on a scheme of parallelism and seriality. The second depends on congruence, confluence, it is a figure of starred intersection. The first relies on decomposability into elements and on the finding of a common feature or a law, whilst the second depends on ideas of concentration and saturation. The unicity of universality is therefore intrinsically bounded to a notion of difference-in-parallelism (or comparability, as the law of identity is within) or difference-in-convergence (where the law is outside, and can therefore assume a temporalizing function, as, we will later see, in Benjamin's notion of the 'messianic end of languages'[215]). Insofar as it reconciles the two schemes we have just mentioned (parallelism, convergence), Desargues' geometry is shown to be the

[215] See *supra*, p. 206.

pivotal model enabling Leibniz to abolish, in the infinite, the distance between human and divine knowledge –two standpoints on universality itself.[216] As Serres concludes, 'Leibniz has written the system of systems, by variations, translations, change of referentials […] he has knotted it in the divine point of view, in the infinite: and by doing so, he has written only one system.'[217]

The theory of *situs*, of monadic points of view, enables the unification of both the world and the perceived, leading both in the direction of a theory of science and a theory of experience. As Laurence Bouquiaux has shown, Leibniz's philosophy of the *situs* is composed both of 'realist' texts, based on substances as principle forms of unity, and 'phenomenist' texts, where the unity of composition comes from perception.[218] In fact, the depth of Leibniz's theory of perspective comes from the mutual implication of ichnography and scenography: the point of view of the perceiving substance is not exterior to the world, but integral to it, in so far as it is the perception of the world in which it is plunged or embedded.[219] Therefore a *perspectivist universalism* has the potential of undoing the distinction between the two models broadly characterized as 'communicational' and 'hermeneutical', *by showing that they constitute two perspectives on the same process.*[220] They correspond to two different standpoints (ichnographic, scenographic) on the same system of communication. There is no 'equivalence' if we cannot consider the process of translation externally, analyse the content of each message and compare it. Any such comparative endeavour requires an *external*, or overbearing, point of view. For a 'transformative' translation to take place, on the other hand, we need to undertake an *internal* perspective and enter the intricacies of the

[216] It is worth remarking that Kant's formulation of the 'regulative use' of ideas can also be considered to be deriving from, or be imaginatively configured upon, projective geometry. For Kant, transcendental ideas 'have an excellent and indispensably necessary regulative use, namely that of directing the understanding to a certain goal respecting which the lines of direction of all its rules converge at one point, which, although it is only an idea (*focus imaginarius*) – i.e., a point from which the concepts of the understanding do not really proceed, since it lies entirely outside the bounds of possible experience – nonetheless still serves to obtain for these concepts the greatest unity alongside the greatest extension.' Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, p. 591 [A 645 / B 673].

[217] *SL*, p. 810.

[218] Laurence Bouquiaux, 'La notion de point de vue dans la métaphysique leibnizienne ' in *Perspective: Leibniz, Whitehead, Deleuze,* ed. Benoit Timmermans (Paris: Vrin, 2006), p. 27.

[219] Ibid., p. 32.

[220] Arguing that these two perspectives might be interpreted in terms of the subjective-objective distinction would be, of course, self-undermining. What the reframing of this question in a Leibnizian framework allows us is precisely to aim at an indeterminate space *prior* to this opposition or *in the very movement* of its constitution. In fact, Serres shows us multiple ways in which Leibniz's theory of communication precedes and exceeds the birth of the subject.

relation; we need to know *the specific composition of each perspective*, to attend to these 'varieties of strong connexity.'[221] Thus, Serres' split exposition (and exploration) of Leibniz's systematicity constitutes an original way to restage the tension and the dynamic between, in Benveniste's terms, *langue* (as system of signs), and discourse (as individual instrument of communication or individuated *langue*). As his later texts reveal with even more clarity, Serres' originality in this debate stems from his refusal to posit the world of experience as an unanalysable (or non-mathematizable) domain, and the world of things as a mathematizable domain, but to reframe both of them within a 'translational' theory of knowledge.

[221] Serres, 'Leibniz retraduit en langue mathématique', *H3*, p. 116.

CHAPTER IV

Translation as Structuralism's Afterlife

In the previous chapter, I showed that one of the main objectives of *the System of Leibniz* was to draw an indissoluble link between form and movement. Models are models in so far as they transport and translate themselves throughout the Encyclopedia. The models' capacity for expression depends on their transport, and symmetrically their translatability depends on their expressivity, or capacity of reflecting a multiplicity. As such, Serres' 'Leibnizian Structuralism' consists above all in the construction of a system of communications, where communication is not defined in phenomenal or psychological terms, but by a certain mode of *translatability*. However, as it remains ideally regulated by God, the system of translatability uncovered in Leibniz constitutes a perfect cybernetic system, a limit-hypothesis, against the backdrop of which Serres' subsequent works unfold. In this chapter, which addresses the corpus constituted by the *Hermès* series (1968-1980), translation's crux is no longer composed of the couple, expression and transport, but transport and *transformation*. For Serres, translation is the main modality in which 'systems of communication' become historical, from mathematics to the living organism. In the first section of this part, dedicated to Serres' writings on mathematics and geometry, I will focus on Serres' *translational* exploration of the history of sciences, which is as much an engagement with the content of the history of sciences as with the question of its *historicity*. Such an engagement, I will argue, is fundamentally linked to Serres' own radicalization of the critique of epistemology launched in the French epistemological circles during the Interwar period. In other terms, it constitutes Serres' own variation on the influential theme of a philosophy of the concept.[1]

[1] As I propose to clarify in the course of this chapter, Serres' conceptualization of translation can be grasped as an extensive reflection on the 'travail du concept' in the spirit of what Canguilhem designated by this expression in his 1963 analysis of Bachelard's philosophy of the no, and which would become the *envoi* and motto of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*: 'To work a concept is to vary its extension and comprehension, to generalize it through the incorporation of exceptional traits, to export it beyond its region of origin, to take it as a model or on the contrary to seek a model for it – to work a concept, in short, is progressively to confer upon it, through regulated transformations, the function of a form.' Georges Canguilhem, quoted in Peter Hallward and Knox Peden, *Concept and Form, Volume 1: Selections from the Cahiers Pour l'Analyse* (London and New York : Verso Books, 2012), p. 70.

1. Intrinsic Epistemology

Autochthony

> In its relation to scientific knowledge, philosophy seeks a site from where to speak about the encyclopedia. But the latter, well constructed, speaks a language closed upon itself […] Let us eliminate distance, and enter into the effective working of science. Let its discourse speak.[2]

After Auguste Comte, French philosophy of science's main impulsion has been to move away from the epistemological naturalism that had previously dominated. Such an 'external epistemology ' could only miss the movement of science itself. This imperative remained one of Bachelard's fundamental legacies in defining the relationship between philosophy and the sciences. As Canguilhem writes in 'What is a Scientific Ideology?,' this 'requires an installation in the content of scientific enunciations (*énoncés*) and this 'installation' can only be a practice.'[3] Through this problem, 1960s 'epistemologists' of science were obliquely contemplating the idea of philosophy's disappearance: either 'redundant' in accompanying and iterating the workings of science, or 'logicist' (and normative) but a-historical.[4] As a consequence, it was through a different treatment of *history* that philosophy could hope to find its way to the sciences. 'If epistemology is historical, the history of science is necessarily epistemological.'[5] For Serres as for Canguilhem, locating epistemology within the historicity of science constituted a way of dissolving the problem of the 'secondary' or 'derived' status of epistemology. Rather than articulating a 'discourse upon another discourse', an internal epistemology was to be sought *within the effective process* of mathematics.

The 'Mathematical Anamneses' (1966) provides us with a condensed overview of Serres' approach to these questions. This lengthy article needs to be grasped in the

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[2] Michel Serres, 'Leibniz retraduit en langue mathématique', in *Hermès III, La traduction* [hereafter *H3*, all translations mine] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974), p. 155.

[3] Georges, Canguilhem, 'Qu'est-ce qu'une idéologie scientifique?' in *Idéologie et rationalité dans l'histoire des sciences de la vie: nouvelles études d'histoire et de philosophie des sciences* (Paris: Vrin, 1977), p. 108; 'What is a Scientific Ideology', *Radical Philosophy* 29 (1981), p. 20.

[4] Michel Serres, 'La querelle des anciens et des modernes', in *Hermès I, La communication* [hereafter *H1*, all translations mine] (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 66, note 1.

[5] Georges Canguilhem, 'Introduction ' to Dominique Lecourt, *L'épistémologie historique de Gaston Bachelard* (Paris: Vrin, 2002), p. 9.

context of the debates around the *history of truth*, which formed the immediate environment for Serres' writings at the time. Emerging simultaneously in the works of Canguilhem, Derrida and Foucault, this debate consisted, broadly speaking, in the reproblematization of the status of science (and its truth) in relation to its outside, be it culture, ideology or history as its conditions of production or possibility.[6] Whilst Serres' reflection on the history of truth remains anchored in the more traditional question of the *historicity of pure forms*, I will show that it constitutes a theoretical pivot of his early philosophy.

The kernel of Serres' reflection is a problem that is formulated in 'the Mathematical Anamneses' as follows. Mathematics can be understood as a 'well-formed language'. This 'pure logos ' should be, as such, impervious to historicity (containing an invariable truth). At the same time, it seems that its *truth* can only be established 'by reference to the global system that contains it and makes it possible'.[7] In other words, how can mathematics be at once autonomous and heteronomous? The paradox dissolves, Serres claims, if we consider the history of mathematics as '*the (meta)morphoses of a logos referred to* itself, mathematics being the science of this auto-reference, and rigour, the science of this application.'[8] This formula announces, in a nutshell, what I will gradually disentangle in the following pages. In order to unfold Serres' argument, I will refer to various other texts on mathematics scattered through the *Hermès* series. I will show that Serres' original contribution to the aforementioned debates is not so much to consider science or mathematics as a language, as to consider it as a permanent translation of itself. As a result, the reflexive process of mathematics upon itself does not lose itseft in an infinite abyss of pure reflection, but is marked by the cultural and historical 'impurities' stemming from the difference between languages. Whilst mathematics remains the paramount example of a *self-grounding* discourse and an *autochthonous* language, it is also a fundamentally *impure* language. For Serres,

[6] According to Balibar, the expression 'history of truth' refers to a problem that animated French debates around logics, epistemology and phenomenology between the 1950s and the 1980s. For Balibar, this expression marks the specificity of the French debate of the 1960s, conferring it 'a relative autonomy with respect to its international environment ' Etienne Balibar, 'The History of Truth: Alain Badiou in French Philosophy', in Peter Hallward (ed.) *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), p. 23. The question is addressed in greater details in his chapter 'Etre dans le vrai?', in *Lieux et noms de la vérité* (La Tour d'Aigues: Editions de l'Aube, 1994), pp. 163-209.

[7] Michel Serres, 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 78.

[8] Ibid.

'mathematical historicity is nothing else than the history of an impurity, which means of a certain type of non-mathematicity'.[9] Grasping the singularity of mathematical historicity requires us to show how the latter is at once a self-grounding language and a historical one. This search for a historical definition of the mathematical *a priori* can therefore be held as constituting Serres' own strategy to historicize the transcendental. Yet, historicizing here does not mean objectifying or naturalizing its process from without, but, importantly, adopting an inner perspective on mathematics. As I will now unravel in more detail, this inner perspective is none other than that provided by the process of translation itself. Indeed, Serres demonstrates that by translating itself in new languages, by translating its 'atoms of sense ' into new idioms, mathematics unceasingly transforms its own grounds.

Mathematical Semiotics

Serres' reflections on the self-grounding character of mathematics owe much to the philosophy of Jean Cavaillès. As with Cavaillès, Serres' philosophy of mathematics takes its point of departure in the so-called 'crisis in the foundations' at the turn of the Twentieth century, a far-reaching questioning of the foundations of mathematical activity.[10] According to Cavaillès, this crisis had revealed that mathematics had to be considered as an autonomous becoming, a *sui generis* historicity.[11] For him, the crisis of mathematics opened by Gödel's incompleteness theorem[12] entailed the absence of any apodictic insurance to start with: 'one needs to entrust the canonic process, the indefinite iteration of its use. And thus the deductive sequence is essentially creative of the contents that it reaches.'[13] In his unfinished and posthumous *On Logics and Theory*

[9] Ibid., pp. 92-3.

[10] This debate was launched by Cantor, Frege, Russel and Whitehead, and pursued by Brouwer, Dedekind, Hilbert, Atkin, to name a few, from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s. This event has not only proven determinant in the history of mathematical theory and subsequent findings, it also marked a point of rupture between 'classical' and 'modern' mathematics, which, among other features, was characterized by 'a preference 'to put thoughts in the place of calculations', and to concentrate on 'structures' characterized axiomatically'. Timothy, Gowers, June Barrow-Green and Imre Leader, *The Princeton Companion to Mathematics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 143. On this topic, see: 'La querelle des anciens et des modernes', *H1* p. 74.

[11] Jean Cavaillès and Albert Lautman, 'La pensée mathématique', in *Oeuvres complètes de philosophie des sciences* (Paris: Hermann, 1994), 595-630.

[12] In a nutshell, Gödel had shown that *no consistent theory containing the theory of integers could be complete or entirely proven within that theory.*

[13] Jean Cavaillès, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, (Paris: PUF, [1947] 1960), p. 73.

of Science, Cavaillès proposed to grasp such a demonstrative process, *i.e.* the essence of mathematical historicity, through two basic operations: paradigmation and thematization. *Paradigmation* designated the progressive unfolding of an *act* by idealisation and substitution and is fundamentally oriented towards its object.[14] In opposition to the longitudinal character of paradigmation, *thematization* refered to a vertical movement, a 'reflexive ' reversal of thought on its operations.[15] These two perspectives on the 'motor effect of abstraction '[16] were crucial in establishing the 'singular becoming of mathematics '[17] as autonomous, necessary and unpredictable at the same time.[18] As Peden puts it, the process described by Cavaillès ' […] is genetic, and not constructivist, insofar as both its necessity and the impossibility of plotting its course in advance are elements internal to the process and not contingent upon any transcendental criteria.' [19] In Cavaillès' own words, the structure of science 'displays, in its movement, the principle of its necessity. Structure speaks about itself.'[20]

From his first writings, Serres generalised Cavaillès' proposition: he made of the problem of the fundaments the main vector of mathematical transformation, putting forward the *crisis* [21] as historical principle against the presumptuousness of

[14] See: Cavaillès and Lautman, 'La pensée mathématique', p. 602.

[15] Pierre Cassou-Noguès, *De l'expérience mathématique, Essai sur la philosophie des sciences de J. Cavaillès* (Paris: Vrin, 2001), p. 272.

[16] Hourya Benis-Sinaceur, 'Structure et Concept dans l'épistémologie mathématique de Jean Cavaillès ', in *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 40, n°1 (1987), p. 25.

[17] Cavaillès and Lautman, 'La pensée mathématique', p. 594.

[18] Ibid., pp. 600-601. In this passage, Cavaillès mentions Leibniz as a precursor in the discovery of both paradigmation and thematization, but only as a 'trivial' one. Serres' work constitutes a thorough response to Cavaillès' disdain for Leibniz, modelling his system on the model of mathematics and describing its 'processes of thought' in details.

[19] Knox Peden, *Spinoza Contra Phenomenology: French Rationalism from Cavaillès to Deleuze* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 46.

[20] Cavaillès, *Sur la logique,* p. 24. Cavaillès' reflection on the *structuration* of mathematical 'thought' (or 'experience') emerged from the same intellectual space as Bourbaki's 'algebraic structures', in the formalism of the Göttingen school (Hilbert, Artin, Noether), and is thus directly related to Serres' views. See: Hourya Benis-Sinaceur, 'Structure et concept dans l'épistémologie mathématique de Jean Cavaillès ', *Revue d'histoire des sciences* 40, no. 1 (1987), pp. 5-30.

[21] As a matter of fact, the crisis had been of continuous relevance since the early Twentieth century, constituting, as José Ferreiros argues, 'a long and global process, undistinguishable from the rise of modern mathematics and the philosophical and methodological issues it created'. (*The Princeton Companion to Mathematics*, Gowers et al. (eds), (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 142.)) In 1960, for Serres, the crisis was still open. Serres, whose fascination for the stakes and consequences of this crisis never seemed to abide, interpreted it as a self-reflection of classical mathematics, which had brought about new strata of language. 'La querelle des anciens et des modernes', *H1*, p. 74.

epistemology.[22] As he writes in 'The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns' (1963), modern mathematics has the singular intention to 'take itself as object; and, in particular, as object of its own discourse.'[23] 'At each moment of great systematic reconstruction,' he observes, 'mathematicians become the epistemologists of their own knowledge. This transformation is a mutation effectuated from the inside.'[24] The crucial point for Serres here is that as much as this reflexive discourse *closes off* mathematics to the external (and externalist) discourse of traditional epistemology, mathematical language also *opens* itself to an always greater amount of objects because it is inhabited by a movement of purification, or increased abstraction. Mathematics is not pure, it moves towards purity. Mathematical theory is, Serres argues, 'internally open, and externally closed'[25]. 'The (paradoxical) result of this closure to any other domain of knowledge is that the organon, the language thus purified, becomes universal. The movement of closure is universalising.'[26] In the precise way of Leibniz's Monad, 'the most *independent* language is the language of languages. The least windows, the most universal reflection.'[27]

> In the mirrored avenue spoken of by Lautréamont, a route is to be followed, continuous or fragmented, of light rays. This open avenue is the very history of mathematics, the *history of a language* in which words strictly respond to each other, a language infinitely translated into new but homologous languages, the history of auto-referred systems, therefore closed, referring to other systems, therefore open, but referring to other systems similarly mathematical, therefore closed […] *The history of forms* making sense within a system is thus involuted, but sometimes, and seemingly all of a sudden, taking another sense than the autochthonous, overtaking their interior auto-reference and therefore evolving outside the system, like a pathological outgrowth, towards a new internal systematic reference, like a lost ray looking for a mirror […] *The history of truths* is always in quest of an enclosed universe which locks them upon themselves, which gives them an existence and possibility, until the rigour requirement makes the interior application intolerable, and shatters the lock for a larger and better enclosed reference […][28]

For Serres, who thinks mathematical idealities through the prism of Leibnizian systematicity, closure and universality, abstraction and expressivity, must be thought

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[22] Is there not, Serres writes, 'a lot of presumptuousness in arrogating the right to talk [*discourir*] about a rigorous language without first settling the language of this discourse?' (Ibid., p. 62.)
[23] Ibid., p. 59.
[24] Ibid., p. 68.
[25] Ibid., p. 72.
[26] Ibid., pp. 72-3.
[27] Ibid., p. 73.
[28] Michel Serres, 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 79.

together. It is not because it is able to subsume a multiplicity of empirical objects under its aisle that mathematics is a universal form of language, but because it is able to *express* them. At bottom mathematics is not a principle of subsumption, but one of expression, circulation and speed.

Beyond the historicity of mathematics itself, Serres, following Cavaillès, is looking for a general theory of science. In *On Logics and Theory of Science*, Cavaillès had suggested to extend the logics of mathematical demonstration to science, in so far as, he wrote, the different scientific disciplines 'condition one another in such manner that the results and signification of one requires […] the use of the others or their common insertion in a system. '[29] But whilst Cavaillès remained elusive regarding this broader system of signification, Serres' works on transdisciplinarity and translation can be interpreted as a completion of this project. In this aim his reflections on Leibniz's acentric encyclopedia provided a fundamental resource.

According to Serres, Leibniz's works do not only display an ideal form of systematicity, they constitute a historical totalization: synthesis of the past and future prediction. As already mentioned, Serres establishes a direct connexion between Leibniz's reflection on science and science's self-reflection in modernity. In a lengthy essay written between 1964-1966 but only published in 1972 in *Hermès II, L'interférence*, Serres develops a philosophical programme called the 'new new scientific spirit' as a critical reiteration of Bachelard's 'New Scientific Spirit' (1934). Written in parallel to his dissertation, to 'laugh and let the pen free after some austere work,'[30] *Interference* spells out Serres' own epistemological project as a speculative generalisation of the Bachelardian notion of 'complexity'. Whilst the latter remained heuristic for Bachelard, Serres poposes to use it architectonically.[31] For Serres, complexity is not merely descriptive; it constitutes the essential core of science.[32] The sciences, Serres argues, evolve by interference and translation, through a complex regime of correspondences.

[29] Cavaillès, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, p. 22.

[30] Michel Serres, *Hermès II, L'interférence* [hereafter *H2*, all translations mine] (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1972) p. 7

[31] Hence the crucial mediation of Leibniz's infinitely 'folded' world. As Deleuze reminds us, both implication and explication are to be related to the Neoplatonic principle of 'complicatio '. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza et le problème de l'expression* (Paris, Les Editions de Minuit, 1968), p. 12. See *infra*, note 82, p. 107.

[32] Michel Serres, 'L'interférence théorique: tabulation et complexité', *H2*, p. 37.

In fact, the growing interconnexions between scientific disciplines realises what Leibniz had foreseen in his method. The contemporary sciences form a 'system in the Leibnizian sense, harmonic without preestablishment.'[33] Inaugurating a new theory of science, this relational regime is to be understood through the double prism of closure and expressivity. Any 'order ' in the sciences, any discipline, is characterized by a similar reflexive 'return of the order on itself '[34]:

> Since the sciences, in their interferences, confer meaning upon one another, it is important to inquire into the conditions in which these exchanges, transfers […] and importations are possible. The unity of flexion upon oneself – which means self-rooting or grounding- and the unity of circulation – internal to the field and tending to the totality of trajectories [parcours]- indicate, together, *a unity of translation or speculation*, (in the sense in which specula reflect one another according to Lautréamont's famous image), different from the unity of synthesis that is required by a certain type of consciousness.[35]

The key to Serres' analysis of interference and transdisciplinarity lies in the complementarity between closure and circulation, a complementarity, which does not involve 'synthesis' but only *reflexive, expressive* or *internal* relations. In translation, there is no third term which allows the movement from a given form to another, and this is why Serres associates it with the specularity of mirrors: there is no perspective but this specular relation between forms or languages. Whilst the synthesis of a multiplicity or manifold always entails a perspective (precisely the perspective from which a synthesis is effectuated), a 'translational unity' does not prescribe a definite perspective from which to grasp it. Such translational unity thus raises a fundamental difficulty for the historian of science or the epistemologist, which Serres explores under the heading of the *principle of indetermination of the history of science*.[36] What explains such indeterminism is the coexistence of multiple truths within scientific discourse, which Serres repeatedly thematizes throughout his works, through the figures of the 'historian', the 'scientist-inventor' and the 'epistemologist'.[37] Whilst the historian, in the

[33] Ibid., p. 36.
[34] Ibid., p.36.
[35] Ibid,. p. 38. Emphasis added.
[36] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, pp. 84-5; 'L'interférence théorique: tabulation et complexité', *H2*, p. 40.
[37] This way of reasoning is a clear influence from Bachelard, who writes, in *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*: 'It is therefore this striving towards rationality and towards construction that must engage the attention of epistemologists. We can see here what distinguishes the epistemologist's calling from that of the historian of science. Historians of science have to take ideas as facts. Epistemologists have to take facts as ideas and place them within a system of

manner of a documentarist, 'blindly gathers exhaustive details on a question' and so accesses the *unconscious* of science, but not its truth, the scientist inventor consciously intends this truth without access to its unconscious, or to the complete 'trajectory' of this truth. The epistemologist, perceived as the mediating figure between these two, needs both to 'know' and to 'circulate'[38]:

> He is subjected to a principle of indeterminism: either he is located here, in this region, and ignores transport (the conference or interference of sense which is undoubtedly the essence of science); or he tries to recognize the latter, and it is thus impossible to fix his situation, his position and references. If one chooses, as I did, the second term of this alternative, it becomes necessary to elaborate a philosophy of transport, of circulation, a philosophy of the absence of reference.[39]

In the coordinates of this exclusive disjunction, entering transports and circulation means loosing reference. This might be the quandary of any translational approach to philosophy: What kind of knowledge or sort of 'truth' do we unravel when we single out circulating concepts or references? From what reference point, or against the backdrop of which 'space', are we to grasp these circulations, in the absence of a language of reference?

Anamneses

In 'The Mathematical Anamneses', which is the most intricate article of the *Hermès* series, Serres adds a level of difficulty to this discussion by addressing science not only as a *translational* system, but also as a *historical* totality. Drawing on the complex temporality of the Monad, which carries with it its preestablished origin, the law of its genesis, and the 'horizon of its finality',[40] Serres analyses the historical 'meaning' of mathematical idealities at the convergence of three different perspectives. Any ideality, or 'atom of sense', Serres claims, possesses three historical meanings (*sens*): 'its sense of birth, henceforth sedimented, naturalised; the whole of its senses at each reactivation […]'; and its recurrent sense for the retroactive restructuration of the

thought. A fact that a whole era has misunderstood remains a fact in historians' eyes. For epistemologists however, it is an obstacle, a counter-thought.' Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* (Manchester: Clinamen, 2002), p. 27.

[38] 'L'interférence théorique: tabulation et complexité', *H2*, p. 40.

[39] Ibid., pp. 40-1.

[40] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 82.

whole (that is its scientific truth).[41] This implies the fundamental *indetermination* of the history of sciences, 'either *I know the position of the concept and I ignore its speed* (*vitesse*), its own movement which is its veraciousness (*véridicité*), *or I know its speed and I ignore its position*.'[42] As a response to this problem, Serres proposes to invert the perspective, that is, to *internalize* it, by focusing on the *production of sense* embedded in the very process of thematization of the science. There lies, for Serres, the 'living kernel of mathematical historicity'. At the 'luminous point of invention', the mathematician, like Leibniz's God, 'knots connexions, cuts impurities that will become sediments.'[43] From within his own mathematical practice, the mathematician becomes a historian, or, more precisely, an archeologist.[44] 'Mathematics is archeology, but archeology by the shortest path, by continued abandon of traditional meanders.'[45] For Serres, we must rethink the history of science from the vantage point of this autochthonous production of temporality, which is the result of mathematical language's self-translation.

The Platonic notion of anamnesis proves pivotal. While in Plato mathematical idealities' are referred to as the necessary return to their true origin 'before the cycle of incarnations',[46] Serres couples anamnesis with the Bachelardian notion of 'covering-up' (*recouvrement*), which functions, in this occasion, as its dialectical counterpart. For Serres, any reactivation leads to a certain *forgetting*, any truth can become an obstacle, and the existence of new forms only brings about new histories of science *at the price of others*, transforming the latter into 'modes of nescience.'[47] Importantly, the latter is never an absolute situation, for past scientific truths remain valid. 'Take the field of dead histories: Greek geometry, classical analysis [...]. Dead but not false: what is this death of the true which never turns to error?'[48] This, in turn, illuminates the

[41] Ibid., p. 84.
[42] Ibid., p. 84.
[43] It is worth quoting this passage in full: 'It is not surprising that traditional history is indeterminist, as it is post-ordonated towards an unpredictable teleology. Moreover, it is post-ordonated to the indetermination that I signaled earlier: for the complexity of the system which is the genuine reference of the judgement of recurrence makes it difficult to distinguish traditions and origins that are vital to recover from the origins and traditions that are urgent to remember. I wish to designate this difficulty as the living kernel of mathematical historicity in general, as the place where connexions are knotted, where impure adherences are cuts to sediment, in short, the luminous point of invention.' Ibid., p. 93.
[44] Ibid., p. 102.
[45] Ibid., pp. 104-5.
[46] Jean-Michel Salanskis, *Philosophie des mathématiques* (Paris: Vrin, 2008), p. 145.
[47] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 91.
[48] Ibid., p. 110.

paradoxical situation of the history of mathematical truth enounced by Serres at the beginning. For Serres, truth's 'name' can only be established through a broader set of referentials, ideology, cultural formations or language. But whilst the concept of truth (*i.e.* the philosophy of mathematics) varies, the 'automatic essence of the true' (*l'essence automatique du vrai*) remains invariant through time: 'the true remains invariant through diachronic transformations, whilst the *concept of truth* changes.'[49]

More importantly, anamnesis or reactivation is defined as a translational undertaking. Mathematical invention is nothing other than a 'successful application of a region upon others, or even, an application of the system on itself.' The original movement of science 'defines a system of translations. Each synchronic cut possesses its conditions of translatability.'[50] The purifying process of mathematics is such that, we can always translate an anterior language into a posterior one, but the inverse is not true. Whilst Euclydian space can be translated into the language of topology, the reverse does not hold: 'the intersection between two repertories can be empty.'[51] The history of mathematical systems can hence be grasped as 'a tran-slation, resumed in every instant, history of discoveries and re-covering (*découvertes et recouvrements*).'[52] Yet, and this is key, 'the translating correspondence fails as soon as it succeeds', there is no *perfect application*.[53] There is always a residual impurity that is later taken up and pursued further. This *unthought* of mathematical history corresponds to what has not been translated into the new language, but may come back, centuries later, once rendered intelligible through a new language. This ever-changing zone is the residual, which, produced by the passage through different translations, is not entirely captured in the new language or the new form, yet reachable from another language or another point of departure. In other words, if every translation entails a certain *recouvrement*, translation is the continuous fabrication of the unconscious of science. Serres conceives these mathematical 'untranslatables' as the dynamic core or motor of its historicity: 'the origin of history is starting anew at each translation into a new language.'[54]

[49] Ibid., p. 110.
[50] Ibid., p. 105.
[51] Ibid., p. 105.
[52] Ibid., p. 106.
[53] Ibid., p. 107.
[54] Ibid., p. 108.

What is important here is that the translational historicity of mathematics implies that mathematical 'purity' is a fundamentally *relative* notion, a point Serres had already made clear in *Interference*. The movement of mathematics towards a more and more refined purity always retrospectively reflects the anterior stage as 'more technical.'[55] Therefore, by moving towards rigour and universality, mathematics also *discovers* its other origins: singular, applied, technical.[56] This discovery can only be made from within the autochthonous process of mathematics; as Serres writes, 'a cultural formation is only accessible as pre-mathematical within and through the autochthonous process of mathematics,'[57] and never externally to it. In this sense, mathematics constitutes, according to Serres, an 'archaeological' form of research: by evolving towards purity, mathematics deepens its 'empirical' ground, its practical 'unconscious.'[58] Furthermore, 'these two limits, these two 'origins' *can only exist by means of one another*, the first being arbitrarily as technical, the second as pure as one wants.'[59] From this standpoint, the 'miracle' of geometry's origin can only appear scandalous: what is miraculous in it is not purity, but the arbitrariness of this act, which 'designates as pure a mixed and complex ore.'[60]

Origins of Geometry

Like Husserl before him, Serres' reflections on the 'origin of geometry' extend largely beyond mathematics, providing an occasion to reflect on the origin of science and the birth of philosophy. On the one hand, the origination of mathematical idealities is held as a paradigmatic case for the understanding of ideal forms in general – their genesis, historicity and mode of being. On the other hand, the hypothetical threshold

[55] 'L'interférence théorique: tabulation et complexité', *H2*, p.51.
[56] Ibid., p. 52.
[57] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 102.
[58] There are two modes of archaeology: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic archeology is 'the movement mathematic as such, which ceaselessly reactivates its origins and deepends its foundations, by iteration of its internal recurrence, unravelling primitive idealities that were not mathematical and become so by this move.' As such, it is both recurrent and teleological. Extrinsic archeology, on another hand, consists in reading the prehistory of mathematics' *abandoned concepts*, and with these fossils to 'reconstitute the lost genesis of a lost ideality.' Unlike the first, this movement is only regressive: 'the progressive path of effectivity is forbidden and crossed [...] as the ideality it deals with is no longer mathematical.' (Ibid., p. 102) Thus, for Serres, 'a cultural formation is only accessible as pre-mathematical within and through the autochthonous process of mathematics', (Ibid.) and never externally to it.
[59] 'L'interférence théorique: tabulation et complexité', *H2*, p. 52. Emphasis mine.
[60] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 92.

constituted by this 'discovery', marking a 'before' and 'after' which is at once historical and theoretical,[61] constitute a vantage point on historicity as such. Such association was clearly set out by the late Husserl in 'The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy' (1935). At the beginning of the 1960s, Derrida, who had entered the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* the same year as Serres, had published his seminal commentary-introduction to Husserl's short essay, 'The Origin of Geometry', contributing to the revival of this classical debate under radically new auspices. Serres' writings on the origin of geometry, which punctuate his entire early period,[62] should be read in this double connexion, as a critical response to Husserl, and in 'parallel' to Derrida's commentary.[63]

As Derrida argues, Husserl is not interested in the *factice* historical event standing for geometry's origin; his intent is historical-transcendental as he tries to overcome the Kantian separation between *innate* ideal objects and empirical history, to mediate between the interior assumption of mathematical truths (or sheer Platonic anamnesis) and its purely extrinsic conditions of apparition.[64] Husserl aims at explaining how geometry, in its historical development, constantly reactivates its origins and constitutes an original form of historicity, which serves as a paradigmatic case not only for its historicity but also for idealities in general. Husserl's essay is focused on the elaboration of an original historicity of science detached from the empirical history-of-facts, which nevertheless has the latter as its condition.[65] This original historicity supposes the 'always reproducible, inaugural signification' (*Erstmaligkeit*) of the first

[61] As Derrida remarks in his commentary of Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry', the problem of the origin of idealities resides in the ambiguous character of this 'before' and 'after.' In this question, the genetic perspective and the consequential perspective are indeed interlaced in a singular way. See: Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction', in Edmund Husserl, *L'Origine de la géométrie*, 3rd edition (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), p. 55.; Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*, trans. by John P. Leavey Jr (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 65.

[62] In *Hermès I*, *La Communication*, figure two texts that can be read together, as two reflections on the origin and the historicity of forms, later pursued in 'What Thalès saw… ' (*Hermès II*) and in 'Origin of geometry' numbered 3, 4 and 5 in *Hermès V*. The presence of this thematic at the beginning and at the end of the series indicates, we believe, its crucial importance. I have not taken into account Serres' later book, *The Origins of Geometry*, published in 1993.

[63] Such a parallel is interesting insofar as both Derrida and Serres, to a certain extent, developed a special concern for translation in reflecting on science's historicity, but pursued this questioning in different directions afterwards. Defining the *text* by *setting its boundaries or limits*, between total translatability and total untranslatability, remained central for both philosophers throughout.

[64] Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction', in Edmund Husserl, *L'Origine de la géométrie*, 3rd edition (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1999), pp. 23-4.

[65] Ibid., p. 56 & p. 175.

concrete and lived *act* of geometrical idealisation or 'proto-foundation', which each of its subsequent reactivations re-opens. The continuity of tradition that Husserl describes is not ensured by its chronological continuity but by the unity of its becoming: 'it is a *history* only because it is *one* history.'[66] This unity depends both on the identity of the intentional act of idealisation and on the identity of the language in which it is expressed. The possibility of such universal language (or language in general) is the reciprocal condition of what Husserl calls 'co-humanity' or the awareness of constituting *one* community, of belonging to the same world.[67]

Derrida's minute commentary unravels, piece by piece, the paradoxical Platonism of Husserl. It focuses on the situation of truth, which is on this account both outside and inside history, by highlighting its problematic relation to language.[68] For Husserl, we have previously seen, the univocity or transparency of language is the only guarantee of the transmission of truth because it guarantees the 'communication between generations of researchers at any distance. It ensures the exactitude of the translation and the purity of the tradition.'[69] However, Derrida further states that absolute univocity remains out of reach and can only be posited as an infinite idea:

> If, in fact, equivocity is always irreducible, that is because words and language in general are not and can never be absolute objects. They do not possess any resistant and permanent identity that is absolutely their own. They have their linguistic being from an intention which traverses them as mediations. The 'same' word is always 'other' according to the always different intentional acts which thereby make a word significative [signifiant]. There is a sort of pure equivocity here, which grows in the very rhythm of science.[70]

The paradoxical historicity of truth is therefore to be transmitted or conveyed in a language that is at once univocal (in its intentioned sense) and equivocal (in the multiplicity of its intentional acts). Derrida shows that Husserl project can actually only locate itself *between* pure univocity and pure equivocity, or, we could add, pure translatability and pure untranslatability, and that this intermediary position of

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[66] Ibid., p. 38.
[67] Ibid., p. 74.
[68] Ibid., p. 57.; Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*, trans. by John P. Leavey (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 66.
[69] Ibid., p. 103.
[70] Ibid., p. 104.

language is the only guarantee of its historicity.[71] The 'culture and tradition of truth' is thus 'marked by a paradoxical historicity': it is, at once liberated from all history and empirical content and yet depends on its concrete instances of reactivation, and is, as such, 'the most profound and pure history.'[72]

For Serres, the origin of geometry is an origin, not in the sense of an absolute beginning (of Western rationality), but *in so far as it opens up the process of translation,* which science would thereafter not cease to be.[73] Reactivation is not understood as a repetition of the intentional act of a single, 'proto-founding' and primary idealisation, but becomes, in Cavaillès' sense, self-grounding. With translation, Serres proposes to enter the effective process of science (*le procès effectif de la science*) without recourse to the notion of consciousness, grounding its 'generating necessity' in its 'material progress.'[74] Whereas Husserl considered the origin of geometry as unveiling of its rational *telos*, Serres dislocates this unilinearity by giving a multiple, *narrative* account of the origin.[75]

> [T]o raise the question of the Greek beginning of geometry is precisely asking how we moved from one language to another, from one type of writing to another, from the so-called natural language and its alphabetical notation to the rigorous and systematic language of numbers, measures, axioms and reasoning *in forma*. But our documents can only *display* these two languages, on the one hand, narratives or legends and on another, demonstrations or figures. […] And so we are stationed, facing these two parallels that never touch one another. This origin is running ahead, inaccessible, unseizable. The problem is open.[76]

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[71] 'If a radical equivocity precludes history, in effect, by plunging it into the nocturnal and ill-transmissible riches of "bound" idealities, absolute univocity would itself have no other consequence than to sterilize or paralyze history in the indigence of an indefinite iteration.' (Ibid., p. 102)

[72] Ibid., p. 59.

[73] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, p. 107.

[74] Jean Cavaillès, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science*, (Paris, PUF, [1947] 1960), p. 78. Diverging with a large part of Cavaillès' followers, however, Serres is looking for such a 'generating necessity ' not in Spinoza, nor in the dialectic of the idea, but in Leibniz, and in translation. Here the attack launched against phenomenology does not rely on Spinoza's rationalism, but on Leibniz's.

[75] As Delco writes, 'the analyses conduced by Serres on a rich and composite corpus of Greek texts show that we can only speak of the origin of geometry in the plural […] in order to uncover the interplay of its crossed determinations, in the absence of an elective, Archimedean point of foundation.' Alessandro Delcò, *Morphologies. A Partir Du Premier Serres*, (Paris : Editions Kimé, 1998), p. 13.

[76] Michel Serres, 'Origine de la géométrie, 5', in *Hermès V, Le passage du Nord-Ouest* [hereafter *H5*, all translations mine] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1980), p. 185. Emphasis mine.

The putative origin of geometry can be figured at the (impossible) convergence of two parallel lines: that of the geometers and arithmeticians and that of legends or histories. Between these formalisms and these narratives, between 'thinkers' and 'historians', we can only operate punctual translations.[77] In spite of the disparity of arguments invoked by Serres in his different narratives of the origin of geometry, each situation displays a certain relation (*rapport*), a certain passage from one realm of forms to another, *hence a translational situation*. As a result, univocity is not the '*a priori* and *telos*' of equivocity anymore,[78] but the reverse is true: equivocity makes up the surroundings, and the ineliminable milieu of univocity. Translations are passages conducting from univocity to equivocity, to univocity and so on, in an unending process. Rather than 'communicating' through their common origin (that is also their *original*), mathematical idealities evolve by restlessly transporting themselves: between spaces, graphs, channels.

In 'Origine de la géométrie 4', Serres conceives the translational origin of geometry in a quasi-literal way, as a relation between two types of writing: Egyptian and Greek. Geometry does not emerge in the mind of the first geometer, 'be it named Thalès or as one wants', but in the field of possibilities produced by the translation between two inscriptions. Whilst hieroglyphs are figural and diagrammatic, Greek alphabet is literal and algebraic.[79] Serres proposes we view the origin of geometry as an association between the Egyptian skill of representation and cartography and the convention and formalism of the Greeks.[80] Geometry thus emerges from the 'short-circuit' between a system of forms (images) and a certain formalism, between the Egyptian language and the Greek possibility of meta-language, concentrated in the sign-form.

As Serres argues in 'What Thalès saw…', translational situations can also be grasped *as the formation of new techniques based upon others*, the perpetuation of technique through repetition.[81] Serres reinterprets the famous legend of Thalès at the pyramids narrated by Plutarch and Diogène Laërce as the making accessible of the inaccessible

[77] Drawing on the image of the Rosetta stone, Serres thus writes: 'Here, no language is unknown or undecipherable, no face of the stone poses problem, what is at stake here is the common edge of two faces, their common border, what is at stake is the stone itself.' (Ibid., p. 189.)
[78] See: Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry'*, p. 107.
[79] Alessandro Delcò, *Morphologies*, p. 21.
[80] Michel Serres, 'Origine de la géométrie, 4', *H5*, p. 179.
[81] Michel Serres, 'Ce que Thalès a vu au pied des pyramides', *H2,* p. 172.

through the construction of a model and the discovery of the notion of a group of similitudes.[82] The sun was used as an invariant in the determination of a series of relations, which could only be captured through the creation of a reduced model. As a consequence, Thalès most important ruse was the invention of a *model*, to render tangible the intangible (the precise height of the pyramids):[83]

> 'Thus, Thalès repeats his own origin, and ours: his mathematics, his metric of geometer repeats in a different way, designates in a different way the modality of our relation [*rapport*] to objects, […] it inserts itself in the open chain of these utterances and these designations, but it does not give the key of the number, it does not gouge out the secret articulation of the knowledge and practice where the possible origin resides. It is a relation between two shadows, two secrets, two forms and two numbers, relation or logos, relation [*rapport*] and speech to be transmitted, speech that transmits a relation [*rapport*]'[84]

Mathematicity is not located *in* pure forms, but in these applications. The rigour of mathematics is none other than an infinite development from translation to translation. Loosing its character of absolute and thereby originary determination, purity becomes the result of a previous application. Such a minimal conception of technique erases the distinction between nature and science, leaving the dynamic interplay of languages as the true locus of scientificity. It presents scientificity as the *effect* of its rigour, rather than as its cause. But while he unsettles this fundamental (and often unthought) axiom of the philosophy of science, Serres does not rid science from truth, but transposes the latter into a semiotic plane, which functions as its structure of appearance.

The crux of this debate, and its continual relevance, goes beyond the sheer pluralisation of the narratives of the origin. If science is, for Husserl, rooted in co-humanity and in a space of potential communications, his approach presupposes universality through the possibility of rational intercourse. Moreover, Husserl's framework associates the foregrounding of science with its Greek, and more broadly European, first emergence. Serres does not only relativize the origin by pluralising it, but by *symmetrising* it. By thinking technicity and purity as the two *limits* of science, the 'origin' loses all its historicist connotations to become a liminal passage: abstraction (towards purity) and archaeology (towards technicity). Translation thus points towards a different type of

[82] Ibid., p. 164; 'Origine de la géométrie, 5', *H5,* p. 187
[83] Alessandro Delcò, *Morphologies,* p. 14.
[84] 'Ce que Thalès a vu au pied des pyramides', *H2,* p. 172.

intersubjectivity, one that does not occur in the self-transparency of language, but in the *production* of a common language. Furthermore, by conceiving the origin of geometry as a translation, Serres proposes an entirely different model of the birth of philosophy. The hermeneutical, Heideggerian conception of the origin as *question* (which, as an address, calls for a question in return or *Rückfrage*) [85] is overturned by a translational model. We thus exchange the question-response paradigm for a differential one, where movement or change arises from the necessity to respond to a crisis or a contact between languages. Philosophy and science would only be born from a variation. Hence, to the phenomenological or hermeneutical account of a *tradition of truth*, Serres opposes a translational reflection on the temporally complex, multilinear *history of truth*.

> No monument can inform us on the contemporaries' gnoseologic attitude towards these forms. But we know that the Greeks started to discuss them, taking them as objects of their discourse. We know that they invented a logos appropriate to their analysis […], that they started to translate them in a speakable and universally communicable language. They started to decode and decipher them and hence shifted from an inward-looking spatial schematism, immobile and only communicable in the secrecy of a trick, to a language that designated part of its own sense. In other terms, they substituted ideographic writing of geometrical forms with a signaletic writing with letters and signs which applied as well as possible to the first: *its rigour being in this application, of this translation*. The Greek miracle is an ordinary miracle in the mathematical realm, which consists in recognizing an ideography in a form, one or several meanings within a symbol; to know how to translate them into a signaletic and communicable graphism in a manner in which the two languages, the two writings find themselves in the most exact rapport.[86]

The Intersubjective Genesis of Abstraction

Before putting a close to this section, we need to evoke a last account of the 'origin of geometry', which Serres exposes in 'The Platonic Dialogue and the Intersubjective Genesis of Abstraction' (1966). [87] As we have analysed in the previous section, Serres does not address mathematical idealities as mere givens, rather he adopts a genetic perspective on them, showing that mathematical idealities are the result of complex 'transhistorical dialogues'. In this text, Serres considers the translational origin of

[85] Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry'*, p. 12.
[86] 'Les anamnèses mathématiques', *H1*, pp. 106-7. Emphasis mine.
[87] The English translation was published under the shortened title: 'Platonic Dialogue ' in Michel Serres, *Hermès. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. by J. V. Harari & D. F. Bell (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), pp. 65-70.

geometry from the perspective of a regular dialogue between two interlocutors. For communication to take place 'two persons need to know the same graphic, they need to know how to code and decode a meaning by means of the same key.'[88] Serres' first premise is that communication relies on a certain codification, which is, in the case of writing, forms that are drawn. For him, however, shared codification depends as much on this form as on the 'cacography'[89] or noise from which this form appears: 'background noise is *essential* to communication.'[90] For Serres, this has an immediate social consequence: the interlocutors 'are not opposed as in the traditional conception of the dialectical interplay, they are, on the contrary, in the same camp, linked by their interest: they strive together against noise.'[91] In other words, communication establishes itself between two and against a *third*, just as in formal logics, the proposition 'p v –p' can only be established against the backdrop of the principle of the excluded third, which guarantees the impossibility of contradiction.[92] The exclusion of this 'third' enables dialogue to take place, converting conflictuality into communication.[93] According to Serres, every abstraction proceeds from the same gesture, by eliminating the irregularities of the trait and by establishing an 'us' for which this abstraction exists, and which founds its intersubjectivity in return:

> *[…] it is one and the same act to recognize an abstract being through the occurrences of its concrete signaletic and to agree upon this recognition*. In other terms: the act of eliminating cacography, of attempting to suppress noise, is at the same time the *condition for discerning the abstract form* and *the condition of success of communication*.[94]

If abstraction is linked to intersubjectivity, it is not in so far as an ideal intersubjectivity or, in Husserl's word, 'co-humanity' guarantees or grounds it, but because they have the same condition of possibility: the struggle against noise. Serres thus anchors

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[88] Michel Serres, 'Le dialogue platonicien et la genèse intersubjective de l'abstraction', *H1*, p. 39.
[89] 'Bad handwriting or spelling' *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
[90] 'Le dialogue platonicien [...]' *H1*, p. 40; Serres, *Hermès. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, p. 66.
[91] 'Le dialogue platonicien [...]', *H1*, p. 41.
[92] Since information theory is grounded on binary systems, the increase of information, hence of communicability, is also predicated upon the excluded third, which in this context is the guarantee of 'order'.
[93] Such communication is opposed to conflict, but not, interestingly, as conflict's absence. It is a displacement of conflict into the symbolic domain, where the struggle over meaning thwarts intersubjective opposition. This theme is paramount throughout Serres' œuvre, and figures particularly prominently in *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1980] 2007).
[94] 'Le dialogue platonicien', *H1*, p. 43.

abstraction in the 'negative' materiality of the communicational situation. The rational *telos* of communication and the pure *telos* of abstraction are both defined via what hinders them, that is, materiality. Inversely the 'dematerialization of reasoning' renders possible both science and universality; the success of abstraction being 'isomorphic' to the success of communication in dialogue.[95] Insofar as it associates the greatest univocity (closure) to the highest level of communicability, mathematics remains his paramount model of analysis: 'There is a minimum of noise in mathematical communication. In mathematics, conservation is equivalent to communication.'[96]More broadly, science constitutes an 'optimal communication': as Serres writes, 'scientific truth is identically the possibility of a control in return. The whole of these controls founds scientific rationality. And this is why Plato and no other has really founded it, through a philosophy where roles and counter-roles dialog.'[97]

The communicational paradigm laid out here is as problematic as it is theoretically efficacious. By postulating that science's *telos* is the transport and circulation of information, Serres defines science through its universalizing *telos*, in a *petitio principii* close to Husserl's. At the same time, categorizing forms through the temporal logic of their transmission provides Serres with a powerful means not only to rethink philosophy as a field among other fields (hence to rigorously ground transdisciplinarity in a historical or material formalism), but also, as the next section demonstrates, to rethink the 'language of man' and the 'language of things', as simple variations of one another.

[95] Ibid., p. 44.
[96] Michel Serres, 'L'interférence objective: ce qui est écrit sur la table rase', *H2*, p.122.
[97] Michel Serres, 'Trahison: la thanatocratie', *H3*, p. 87.

2. The Materiality of Mediation

> The real produces the conditions and the means for its self-knowledge.[98]

Until this point, Serres' concept of translation has displayed the potential of an *infinite* circulation (of forms, of references). In the *Hermès* volumes, notions of 'circulation', 'communication' and 'transport' became historicised and finitised through Serres' engagement with the nineteenth-century sciences and thermodynamics.[99] In the material realm, every 'transformation ' is conditional upon the creation of a 'stock' and the circulations of this limited stock of energy are always entropic. Taking up the theory of information configured by Shannon, Briouillin, Wiener, and Atlan among others, Serres 'imported ' it into his own epistemological reflection. With *La Traduction* and *La Distribution*, we thus leave the realm of theological communication (Leibniz) and that of mathematical communication (history of truth) to enter the realm of natural and technical, hence material, systems of communication.[100] However, this shift of scientific paradigm, from mathematics (algebra and topology) to information theory and physics does not involve a change of philosophical approach. On the contrary, it is my contention that Serres' move from ideal to real systematic forms needs to be grasped through the prism of his earlier reflections on historical epistemology, and in the continuation of his programme for epistemology's 'self-destruction.'[101] In this new context of material communication, translation continues to embody the idea of an *intrinsic epistemology*, one that *conserves*, *loses* and *produces* information. Translation both inscribes forms in time and discloses their inner articulation.

For Serres, 'communication' is a paradigmatically *interferential* concept. So far, we have established two of its coordinates: the first was Leibniz's theory of intermonadic relationality (the universal communication of the substances); and the second, the

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[98] Michel Serres, 'Origine du langage', in *Hermès IV, La distribution* [hereafter *H4*, all translations mine] (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977), p. 271.

[99] Michel Serres, 'Vie information, deuxième principe', *H3*, p. 61.

[100] As we have already seen however, these different topics are not sharply demarcated but develop interferentially. In 'Structure and Importation ', Serres was already speaking of the 'conservation ' of truth (against its loss or dissemination), and he introduced the question of technique and the relation of man to nature in 'What Thalès Saw… '.

[101] 'La querelle des anciens et des modernes', *H1*, p. 67.

intra-historical reactivations (the communication of truth). The third, which strongly underpins the first two, takes its roots in the cybernetic programme of the early 1960s, and concerns the communication of energy and information in the broadest sense.[102] Behind these different scenarios, Serres appears to be tirelessly grappling with the problem of mediality and mediation, which also means the possibility of grounding universality in forms of relationality. In each case, translation counter-effectuates the continuum of communication, accentuating its fractures, discontinuities, and general absence of guarantees. In other terms it complicates this relationality by supplementing 'networks' and 'transports' with a semiotic dimension. On the open chain of communications, translation operates a series of conceptual displacements, drawing our attention to the linguistic, hence organised, codified and differentiated, nature of communication (as in the history of science). It highlights the problem of conductivity, and hence entropy, of these channels of communication. Whilst communication designates the medium, translation designates the transport of messages: they are the two facets of mediality.

However, thinking communication and translation as a universal form of mediality induces a circle. On the one hand, Serres provides us with a first theory of the conditions of possibility and emergence of networks of communication, at the historical, physical, and philosophical levels. Each technology of communication is located at the *endpoint* of a long chain of natural, technical and technological inventions. On the other hand, communication is considered to be the *source* of science or the origin of knowledge. Since communication is a *technique* of both man upon nature and of nature itself, it is both conditioned and conditioning. As such, communication and translation occupy a transcendental function in Serres' works, similar to the one ascribed by Derrida to the 'arche-writing,'[103] which also drew its

[102] Serres' project evolves within a theoretical sphere akin to Jakobson or Lévi-Strauss' 1950s works. On the complex historical and political underpinnings of cybernetics, see: Bernard Dionysius Geoghegan, 'From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus', *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2011), 96–126. In this article, Georghegan convincingly argues that the entire cybernetic project, for which Jakobson's institutional and scientific work in the post-war was crucial in mediating between French philosophers and the North American intellectual milieus, developed as part of the U.S. Cold War control apparatus (and thanks to its important funding): 'Through this refashioning of linguistic acts as a technoeconomic matrix of production, Jakobson and his colleagues provided mechanisms for strategically conjoining linguistics, electronics, and economics.' pp. 115-6.

[103] 'And thus we say 'writing' for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not … cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical,

inspiration, as David Cunningham reveals, from the cybernetic programme. At the beginning of the 1960s, Serres had elaborated, like Derrida or Heidegger,[104] on the prospect of a dissolution of philosophy into the cybernetic programme. However, by the early 1970s his earlier optimism had faded away, giving rise to a much more complex translational programme. *La Traduction* and *La Distribution* (third and fourth *Hermès*) encapsulate this paradoxical turning point in Serres' works: at once the *completion* of the programme and its *self-destruction* from within.

In this process, translation does not only complete and subvert Serres' cybernetic 'dream',[105] but it also shakes the grounds of Serres' previous functional structuralism. The theoretical pivot in both cases is the concept of *transformation*. Hence, Serres opens *La Traduction* in these terms:

> We only know things through the systems of transformations of the sets [ensembles] that comprise them. These systems are at least four. Deduction, in the logico-mathematic era. Induction in the experimental field. Production, in the domain of practices. Translation [traduction] in the space of texts. It is not entirely obscure that they all repeat the same word. That any philosophy would be one of 'Duction'.[106] […] It is possible that science would be the set of optimally invariant messages by all strategy of translation. When this maximum

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sculptural 'writing'. … It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and *pro-gram* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. And, finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic *program* will be the field of writing.' Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 9., quoted in David Cunningham, 'Logics of Generalization. Derrida, Grammatology and Transdiciplinarity,' *Theory, Culture & Society* 32, no 5-6 (2015).

[104] 'The role philosophy has played up to now has been taken over by the sciences', remarks Heidegger in a notorious 1966 interview with *Der Spiegel*. : '"Philosophy dissolves into the individual sciences: psychology, logic and political science". "And now what or who takes the place of philosophy?" "Cybernetics." Martin Heidegger, 'Only a God Can Save Us' quoted in Cunningham, Ibid.

[105] Serres' main intuitions concerning the theory of information date back from the early 1960s and in *Interference*, thus at a time in which communication systems and the possibility of a natural mathesis universalis through code and DNA enjoyed a great popularity. A telling example of this intellectual atmosphere is the early 1968 groundbreaking television show 'Vivre et parler ' staging a 'transdisciplinary ' conversation between François Jacob (biologist), Roman Jakobson (linguist), Claude Lévi-Strauss (anthropologist), Philippe L'Héritier (genetician). (Claude Lévi-Strauss, et al. 'Vivre et parler I & II,' In *Les Lettres françaises*. Television interview by Michel Tréguer et Gérard Chouchan (1968)) By the time Serres wrote *Hermès III La traduction*, however, the entire intellectual landscape had changed, and both structuralism and cybernetics had become 'bad' ideologies.

[106] 'Duction' is no more a word in French than in English, but it highlights the suffix common to 'traduction', 'déduction', 'induction' and 'production'. Serres emphasizes this suffix the same way he highlights prefixes on other occasions. According to him, suffixes and prepositions or prefixes are the best terms to describe relationships. See: Latour Bruno, 'The Enlightenment without the Critique: A Word on Michel Serres' Philosophy', in *Contemporary French Philosophy, Cambridge* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 101-109.

> is not reached, it would mean we are in other cultural eras. Deductive, inductive systems… remain the most stable for transport in general; under this threshold, productive, reproductive systems… vary, each according to its difference. Their difference is, in fact, only variation. Hence our interest in examining the operation of translation. Not to define it in the abstract, but to make it function, along the largest compass and in the most diverse fields […] What is at stake is not explication, but application.[107]

Arguably, this introductory claim indicates Serres' shift from the structuralism of algebraic structures to one grounded on 'systems of transformations'.[108] Here, Serres addresses translation from a different semantic perspective from his previous works. Whilst, in the first phase, Serres had put the emphasis on the prefix 'trans-' at play in the pre-modern French term for translation '*la translation*', thus highlighting its affinities with transversality and transfer as a sheer ('costless') transfer; in this second moment Serres picks the postfix of the modern term, 'tra-*duction*'. In so far as it stems from the Latin *ductio* and *ducere* (to conduct), it highlights the active and energetic character of this transport.[109] As I will now demonstrate, in rethinking systems of communication as series of active *applications* or *transformations*, Serres' ambition is not the mere historicization of the previous paradigm, but rather the construction of an altogether different concept of history. This change of focus reflects the shift of Serres' interest from mathematics to physics, and correlatively, to a specific period of the history of sciences: the nineteenth century.[110]

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[107] Michel Serres, 'Préface', *H3,* pp. 9-11.

[108] Serres is apparently making a comparable shift as Lévi-Strauss, who, in the same period was developing the notion of 'transformation' and 'groups of transformations' in his works on mythology. Not incidentally, the concept of translation was also central in the Mythologiques. See: Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Métaphysiques cannibales*. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France - PUF, 2009). For a thorough account of Lévi-Strauss 'second ' structuralism, see Gildas Salmon, *Structures de l'esprit* (Paris: Presses Universitaires France, 2013).

[109] According to Berman, *la translation*, derived from the Latin *translation*, designated above all a 'movemement of transfer,' whereas *la traduction* 'highlights the active energy of this transport, in so far as it refers to *ductio* and *ducere*.' Antoine Berman, 'De la translation à la traduction ', *TTR, traduction, terminologie, rédaction* 1 no. 1 (1988), pp. 29-31.

[110] It is to be noted that this shift also coincides with Serres' work on the edition of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris: Hermann, 1975).

Information and Entropy

> The connexion made between entropy and information is the greatest discovery of history, for the theory of knowledge and for the theory of matter. It is, strictly speaking, the liaison between chance [*hasard*] and necessity. It is a natural philosophy, dictated by the science of information. It is unavoidable.[111]

Shannon's mathematical theory of communication (1948) was developed as part of his researches on information systems (telecommunications), and relied on a purely quantitative notion of information. The point was to evaluate the likeliness of a message to be accurately transmitted or *transported* in the form of signals through a channel.[112] Importantly, Shannon defines information as a function of what it is *not*: information is statistically defined by a certain quantity of uncertainty, or *entropy*. In *Science and Information Theory* (1956), Brioullin suggested to equate *informational* and *thermodynamic* entropy, and thus to think both information and energy on a single, physical scale. Arguing that any gain in information necessitated a certain quantity of energy, he proposed to ascribe information an absolute measure, which he coined 'negentropy' (negative entropy). This permitted him to redefine any scientific experiment through the relation between the *gain* of information and the *increase of entropy* needed, its energetical *cost*.[113] For Serres, Brioullin thus opened the way for the consideration of information as part of nature's functioning, providing an unforeseen articulation between the philosophy of communication and nature. As Serres explains in 'Vie, information, deuxième principe', the theory of information can be viewed as the *intrinsic epistemology of physics*, which is to say, information theory provides us with an autochthonous theory of the 'effective ' limitations of science.

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[111] Michel Serres, 'Vie information, deuxième principe', *H3*, p. 71.

[112] Claude E. Shannon, 'A Mathematical Theory of Comunication ', Reprinted with corrections from *The Bell System Technical Journal,* Vol. 27, pp. 379-423 & 623-656, July & October 1948. [http://cm.bell-labs.com/cm/ms/what/shannonday/shannon1948.pdf]

[113] 'The important point is that all information is paid for in negentropy. The amount of negentropy required is finite, but it is so small (10 -16 per bit) that it has been completely ignored up to now. ' Leon Brillouin, *Science and Information Theory* (Courier Dover Publications, 2004), p. 264.

From Movement to Force: Translation as Dialectic?

Once the bridge between the theory of information and thermodynamics is set forth, scientific knowledge also acquires materiality. As small-scale energies, unities of information 'stocked ' in a written page start to be quantifiable in terms of energetic work through the extremely small number 10^{-16}.[114] This number, according to Serres, measures the difference between *theoretical* practice and *practice* (proper), which is encapsulated in the sixteen zeros of the 'originary delay' (*décalage*) between practice and theory.[115] He contends that '[f]rom the birth of writing humanity has disposed of a double energetical game, a double programme, of which elements were separated by [...] an enormous number. '[116] What is crucial to Serres is that the invention of a proportionality between theory and practice entails the possibility of their mediation; it gives us the coefficient of their translatability into one another.[117] In 'Betrayal: Thanatocracy', a central piece of *La Traduction*,[118] Serres proposes to rethink history itself through the prism of the couple information-energy, centring his attention on the Industrial Revolution. According to him, the invention of motors is the true pivot of this history.

In *the System of Leibniz*, Serres had evoked the possibility of reading the entire Leibnizian philosophy of communication from the vantage point of its physics of propagations.[119] This physics, however, was only a general theory of movement, of transport, and not yet an account of transformation. As he explains in *Distribution*, the only motors available to classical mechanics were differential because as long as one

[114] 'Origine du langage', *H4,* p. 261.
[115] 'Trahison: la thanatocratie', *H3*, p. 89.
[116] Ibid.
[117] Ibid., p. 92.
[118] This essay originated from a review of Robin Clarke, *La Course à la mort ou la Technocratie de la guerre* (1972). For further contextual detail on this essay, see: Michel Serres, *Pantopie : de Hermès à petite poucette : Entretiens avec Martin Legros et Sven Ortoli* (Paris: Editions le Pommier, 2014), pp. 161-184.
[119] 'The catalog is revealing: a study of light's movement and of 'fluid mechanics', offering a theory of elasticity, an examination of magnetism, etc. These disciplines share propagation and diffusion as objects, of which communication theory is the metaphysical crowning. In this sense, pre-established harmony designates God as the origin and the guarantor of communication. As such He founds phenomena, and physics becomes possible. In other words, the conditions of possibility of physics are identical to those of communication.' *SL*, p. 352

ignored how to *produce* force, one could only *represent* it.[120] By discovering the force of heat (thermodynamics) through heat-engines, nineteenth-century science produced the conditions of intelligibility of transformation itself. Hence, Carnot's cardinal problem, Serres explains, was to grasp the conversion of a *difference* into a *transformation*, or how the difference of heat can induce a difference of state. For this contemporary of the industrial revolution, 'what is at stake is not only spatial transport anymore, but the transformation of matter, or transsubstantiation.'[121] The evocation of such a fantastic occurrence of transformation is not a random element of Serres' commentary, but refers to the enormous hiatus to be bridged in the 'articulation of practice upon theory '.[122] The motor of the industrial revolution is the first step of a new 'state of knowledge' in which the impact of science upon nature starts to grow exponentially.[123] The first expedient of this conquest is the domination of life and manpower. Insofar as this history is that of the gradual mastery over the *tra-duction* of information into energy and its *conduction*, Serres grasps it as a history of translation. Indeed, Serres writes, 'any biological organisation is endowed with a quantity of information that exists at the entropic scale: it can therefore be defined as a gigantic machine to translate writing into macrocosmic energy. '[124] History and 'progress' can therefore be considered as the result of the originary discrepancy between 'two programmes ', the two originary 'languages ' of reason and nature.

> A new measure can be derived from this: the immense duration to be spent in order to bridge this hiatus and to access the practical efficacy of theory on the things of the world, themselves ruled by macro-energetic laws. What is history? Nothing else than the delivery, in blood and tears, of this translation that was endlessly speaking the very language of the world.[125]

Whether translation encapsulates a non-Hegelian dialectic is besides the point here. However, this cursive description indicates the radicality of Serres' theoretical proposition in featuring translation as a *historical* operator. The title of the essay, 'Betrayal: Thanatocracy ', gives us a crucial indication on how to interpret this translational historicism. Serres is not reclaiming here an *original* nature, which would

[120] Michel Serres, 'Moteurs; préliminaires aux systèmes généraux', *H4*, p. 46.
[121] Ibid., p. 48.
[122] 'Trahison: la thanatocratie', *H3*, p. 90.
[123] Ibid., 92.
[124] Ibid.
[125] Ibid., pp. 92-3.

have preceded the cycle of translations and would have been betrayed by technique. Rather, he seeks to highlight the betrayal of *life* by a certain economy of death and violence. For Serres, the historical masters of this translation were also its greatest betrayers. But at a second level of interpretation this betrayal can also be read more reflexively as the betrayal of *science* by itself. This is Serres' departure from his earlier optimism, for he has now ceased to 'announce ' a 'new ' technological (cybernetic) and theoretical (structural) age, focusing more than ever on *critique* as the rigorous establishment of the limits of science. Indeed, he writes: 'the only remaining hope is this critique by the end, the short-circuiting of knowledge and its products [...] which defines a critical point of time and history, where the history of the past of reason comes face to face with the end of its hopes and future.'[126] For Serres, bringing the artificial powers of men to the energetic level of nature, translating nature into a tool of self-destruction, is a betrayal of life by science.

Code and Meaning

At the kernel of his analysis lies the biological organism as a system of translation and an 'exchanger of times' (*échangeur de temps*).[127] The organism is 'the best known space of communication: [...] the most reliable, the most efficient in its functioning.' It is the most powerful resort of an 'experimental Monadology'.[128] Indeed, the living organism can be considered as 'a thermodynamic and informational system, stocking, exchanging, emitting energies and information.'[129] As such, and this is crucial, the body can be considered as the 'origin of language'. Serres' eponymous article proposes to draw the radical implications of this hypothesis, describing the living organism as an information system, a layering of information-energy couples, from the molecule to the cell, the cell to the tissue and the organ, and so on.[130] According to Serres, the body encompasses a long continuum of translations, which, at the one end (cell) can be thought of as a proto-language, and at the other end (internal sense, intropaty, proprioception) as 'individuated signals equipped with something like a meaning.'[131]

[126] Ibid., p. 103.
[127] 'Origine du langage', *H4*, p. 263.
[128] 'Vie, information: deuxième principe', *H3*, p. 51.
[129] 'Origine du langage', *H4*, p. 262.
[130] Ibid., p. 265.
[131] Ibid., p. 267.

> Hence the multiple, integrated system [...] may be considered as a series of transformations which effects a move from the noise-information couple towards the meaning-obstacles couple and finally to meaning. Each integration functions as a filter, a rectifier.[132]

Noise plays a pivotal role in this process of successive integrations. What appears as an obstacle to the message at a certain level of integration becomes an ambiguity that increases the complexity of the total information.[133] Furthermore, this entropy can be grasped, Serres polemically claims, as an *unconscious*. Such an unconscious would simply designate the disorder, the 'lack of information' of the system at every stage of integration. Freud himself, we are reminded, was looking for a way to correlate 'the knowledge of signs with that of energy displacements;'[134] he was thus working within the broad framework of a 'topology-energetic'. In spite of the problematic status of the radical biologisation of the unconscious implied by Serres, the interesting point here concerns Serres' use of translation in articulating the unconscious and the conscious, code and meaning. For '[i]n each link of the series the question of language is formulated and reformulated by the transformation of the message, the channel, and the noise: by translation.'[135] The unconscious is, in a way that is similar to Laplanche's theory, both conceived of as a 'waste-product' and as something that has lost referentiality.[136] In other words, untranslatability is 'historically' produced by the transmission of equivocal or obscure information. At the same time, this unconscious or untranslatable does not cease to translate itself, thereby moving to new levels of integration and returning in different forms.

For Serres, the mystery of meaning is therefore primarily *noise*. Noise, he claims, at times functions as obstacle, at times as information, depending, once again, on the perspective or level of generalisation considered.[137] As such, noise is the minimal condition of any mediation, and translation remains the best concept to grasp this paradoxical character: the productivity of its 'failure' and the threat of its 'betrayal'. As he would later write in *Parasite*, 'If the relation succeeds, it is perfect, optimum, and

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[132] Michel Serres, 'Origin of Language ' in *Hermès. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, ed. by J. V. Harari & D. F. Bell (Baltimore & London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 79
[133] Ibid., p. 80.
[134] Origine du langage', *H4*, p. 269.
[135] 'Origin of Language, in *Hermès, Science, Philosophy [...]*, p. 80.
[136] Jean Laplanche, *Essays on Otherness* (Routledge, 2005), pp. 36-7.
[137] 'Origin of Language, in *Hermès, Science, Philosophy [...]*, p. 83.

immediate; it disappears as a relation. If it is there, if it exists, it means that it has failed. It is only mediation. Relation is nonrelation.'[138] Serres' conceptualisation of translation as an entropic form thus becomes a reflection on the limits of knowledge, where the untranslatable is not unknown or unknowable, but not-yet-known and temporary. 'Every knowledge is rimmed with that on which we do not have any information.'[139] This not-yet-known has the figure of a cloud, an aleatory 'distribution', a big number or a multiplicity: these 'disorders'*precisely* define the object of our knowledge. 'It is not the intervention of the subject or the group that ruins objectivity. It is the very *matter* of the discourse. Its object.'[140]

> In an unexpected way, a certain Kantianism, still recently lost in the mythologies of subjective reason, puts its feet on earth: the limits of knowledge are demonstrated, quantified, perfectly evaluable. But of the latter, the only remaining thing is a theory of borders.[141]

For Serres, Brioullin is this pivot who, by 'providing for the not-known, for the unknown, rigorous appreciations,'[142] shows us the limits of our knowledge. He shows that a perfect experience is impossible: each observation has a certain *price*. The reduction of the margin of error to zero, he claims, 'would cost an infinite price. Absolute determinism is a dream, because a perfect precision on initial conditions cannot be obtained.'[143] In other words, Serres writes in *Distribution*, 'the exact knowledge of a determined segment of the past would cost the open infinity of the time to come.'[144] In the material world, noise is thus necessary to communication, and every communication becomes translational in character.

The model of translation Serres develops here excludes 'expressivity' in favour of transport. A given translation is not anymore conceived as a determinate reflection or expression, but as a *message*. Serres thus succumbs to the naturalistic (and cybernetic) tendency of reduction of language to a code, hence to a set of elementary unities, or organised series. This way he radicalizes the move towards an identification of formal

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[138] Michel Serres, [1980] 1982b: 79. Quoted by Brown in *The Parasite* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), p. 8.
[139] Origine du langage', *H4*, p. 271.
[140] Michel Serres, 'Point, plan (réseau), nuage', *H4*, p. 37.
[141] 'Trahison: la thanatocratie', *H3*, p. 96.
[142] 'Vie, information: deuxième principe', *H3*, p. 69.
[143] Ibid.
[144] 'Point, plan (réseau), nuage', *H4*, p. 36.

and natural languages operated by Leibniz.[145] Whilst 'The origin of language' constitutes an attempt to thematize this point of juncture between transport and meaning, information and sense, this remains a phylogenetic narrative of the 'origins' of language, and lacks an account of the inner assumption of language by the speaking subject. Whilst perspective was tied, in Serres' reflection on the history of science, to an *interpretive* inscription in a chain of utterances, in his reflection on such a literally 'natural' language, perspective can only mean 'emitting and receiving' from a given location, material or systemic configuration. Translation thus becomes indistinguishable from the notion of a pure application, and untranslatability, as *noise*, tends to receive a merely quantitative definition. By inserting communication in the chain of natural phenomena, Serres inserts it into history, but such history can only remain a *natural history*.

Naturalism Without Ontology

The introduction of thermodynamics as model of communication has two effects that may seem at first contradictory. On the one hand, the theory of information reinstates the Leibnizian dream of universal communication through biology and the technologies of information: every organism 'stocks, exchanges, receives, emits energy'[146]. On the other hand, this theory also *undermines* the notion of universality through the fundamental problem of discontinuity in knowledge that entropy - that is, chance (*hasard*)- poses. Through the theory of information, Serres thus combines a reflection on a *global* language (where information or heat plays the role of a universal invariant) with a *localization* of epistemology. The circuit of this universal language of information is only given to a certain position. This is what Serres calls a 'topology-energetic', which supplants the precedent figure of knowledge with 'figure and movement'. Whereas the former implied a process of knowledge through abstraction and analysis, the couple topology-energetic is, Serres writes, at once the most general and the most concrete.[147] Accordingly, Serres states that 'the path to the universal is the path leading to the

[145] See: Frédéric Nef, 'La Langue Universelle et Les Langues: Leibniz Biface?', *Critique* 387-388 (1979), pp. 736–51
[146] Origine du langage', *H4*, p. 262.
[147] Michel Serres, 'Estime', *H4*, p. 281.

real'.[148] Under these new auspices, then, the idea of perspectivist universalism returns, however 'perspective' and 'universalism' are now embodied in nature.

The thermodynamical paradigm constitutes a watershed in Serres' trajectory. By the end of *Distribution*, it becomes clear that Serres' aim is not to disclose foundational (unconscious, anthropological, physical) structures anymore, but to use relations as productive or *generative* props. Relations, Serres writes, cease to be 'static, dynamic or homeostatic, to become *rhétiques*,[149] or sometimes *homéorrhétiques*', which means that these relations cease to be oriented towards a system's equilibrium, but connect parts of phrases, constituting their rhythm in circumstantial ways.[150] Movement has gradually taken over structure and Serres' ambitious structuralism is transfigured into what could arguably be described as a theory of cognitive or creative experience, moving away from his initial ambition to 'positive' knowledge. Relationality now belongs to a logic of invention which has lost its claim to positive validation. It is therefore important to underscore that although Leibniz's metaphysics of communication has functioned as a pivot within Serres' own works, the latter did not evolve into a generalised 'ontology of relations'. In his lengthy interview with Bruno Latour (1995), Serres is in fact adamant against the non-reducibility of his philosophy

[148] Ibid., p. 282.

[149] 'Rhétique' is originally a linguistic term but it is hard to know what Serres exactly intends by it. For Austin, it designates an illocutory act, which encompasses both a descriptive and referential meanings. Serres' inspiration probably comes directly from the ancient Greek : ῥῆσις or *rhesis* means 'saying ', 'speech '. (Liddell, G. and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, Abridged ed edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1935)). In *the Five Senses*, Serres illuminates his own conception of the opposition between synthesis and *syrrhèse* in the following way: 'The architect inhabits synthesis; the philosopher seeks it even when he postpones it for a long time, passing lingeringly through empiricism and science to delay it even further, and keeping closer to the landscape artist in order to learn from him, to invent, practise, project with him a concept more elastic than totality, less complete than synthesis, more fluid than addition, looser than integration, more alive than the system, more changing than the concept itself … the edifice makes a totality, like the concept, word, scientific law; the countryside assembles: sketch or pattern, for local gods are strongly resistant to federative efforts; sets, groupings, collections, regroupings, bundles, re-memberings remaining more apposite names for a process that commemorates Eurydice's body and the interminable time necessary to emerge from the infernal shadows. The fields depict limbs that stitch and tie themselves together, confluences that flow into each other like the tributaries of a stream. Fluid slip-knots like those of a loose shawl which takes on the movement of the body and gives it a subtle, ethereal grace: the dynamic, instantaneous unity that we call elegance.' Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), pp. 243-4.

[150] 'Estime', *H4*, p. 289.

to an 'ontology'.[151] If the 'philosophical discipline concerned with the whole set of relations' is not ontology, it is because it does not have to do with being but with movement, in the double sense of moving from A to B (circulating) and producing B from A (generating). What in the first place (until the early 1970s) appeared, in Serres' own terms, as a 'Neo-Leibnizian' metaphysics of communication, needs thereafter to be interpreted, as Serres claims in this interview, as a science of 'prepositions.'[152] At this point, what matters is the *direction* hence the productivity of the relations; not their systematic or cybernetic functions.

3. Aesthetic of the Passage

Ariane hung herself.[153]

As the previous section has shown, the early 1970s was the theatre of a major reversal in Serres' approach to relations. Whilst in the first phase relations were consonant with a strong version of structuralism as a formal conditional realm, in the second phase, this conditional realm comes to be defined by stochastic clouds and aleatory distributions. As a consequence, Serres' 'translations' ceased to focus on abstract forms as 'invariants' but instead focused on the *obstacle* posed to our quest of universality by the chaotic consistency of information. This evolution is characteristic of a post-structuralism which is not directed by a response to the 1968 outbreak, but by a more modest displacement between scientific references and between realms of conditionality. Against dialectics, Serres follows the oblique route of translation, leading us from order to disorder, or from systems to distributions, back to systems.[154]

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[151] Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time: Michel Serres with Bruno Latour*, trans. by Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 103.

[152] Ibid., p. 101.

[153] Michel Foucault, 'Ariane s'est pendue' (About G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*), *Le Nouvel Observateur*, no 229, 31 mars - 6 avril 1969, pp. 36-37.

[154] In *Genesis*, Serres proposes to conceive of the couple system-distribution as an 'elementary mesh': 'the mixture is so intimate that there is no chaotic or distributional place, above or below, right or left, not surrounded by systems, and no system place, left or right, above or below, not surrounded by distributions. ' (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 129.

We are far from 'wandering in the dark rave of crowned anarchy'[155] but rather in the company of a 'modern Zeno', who hikes through the North-Western passage and who 'stitches' spaces together through aesthetic montages. Serres' last figure of translation is an aesthetic insofar as, retaining from Kantianism 'only a theory of borders (*bords*)', it designates a topology of passages.

Discours, Parcours: Local and Global II

Serres' reflection on space situates itself in the continuity of Leibniz's attempts at disclosing a science of the qualitative. With his project of *analysis situs*, Leibniz had accomplished a first rupture with the Euclydian space, showing that mathematicians had unjustifiably confounded the pure and the *metric.*[156] Topology was born, according to Serres from this distinction between space and measure, from ridding the study of space from its practical function -measurement of land and building of houses. 'One realised that the Euclydian space […] was in fact only the space of similitudes […] the former purity became an application, the former reality was taking refuge in the particular of a technology'. [157] The former rigour, Serres claims, was only an *exactitude*. [158] The second turning point arose in the Twentieth-century, when mathematicians realised that certain passages between the local and the global were impossible. Serres provides the example of the sphere: although one can decompose the latter by drawing a tangent plan at each point of its curve, it is impossible to develop this sphere on a single plan. In other words, 'the precise analysis of a thing, in its construction or elementary constitution, does not give the same results as another analysis, which takes its coordinates outside of the object or, at least, keeps its condition in this outside.' [159] Under the categories of opening, closure, border, discontinuity, threshold and so on, topology, 'radically pluralises' the former space of representation, which was abusively universalized by both mathematics and philosophy.[160]

[155] Michel Foucault, 'Ariane s'est pendue,' pp. 36-37.
[156] Michel Serres, 'Espaces et temps', *H5*, p. 69.
[157] Ibid., p. 69.
[158] Ibid., p. 73.
[159] Ibid., p. 70.
[160] Ibid., p. 73.

In *The Nortwestern Passage*, this problematic relation between *the local* and *the global* operates as the privileged standpoint for a more general critique of universalization itself. It confirms the movement of Serres' philosophy towards the concrete, this time not towards noise or clouds, but towards the infinitely *complicated*. For Serres, Mandelbrot's work on fractal objects reactualizes Leibniz's infinite complication and Zeno's paradox, by showing how repetition and profuse diversity both constitute the fabric of the real. 'The real is fractal, […] trimmed, pullulating fragments, divided atoms, particles and quarks of detail. […] The real fragments and bifurcates, replants itself, always regains roots in itself to resurrect.'[161] For Serres, journeying through the real does not mean strolling through landscapes but moving 'orthogonally' to them through different scales. Hence our failure in subsuming the local under the global, or particular laws under universal ones: there is always a reminder, residue or refuse.[162] Contrasting with all 'importation' regimes, the passage between 'exact and human sciences' does not traverse a homogeneous and empty space'; like the North-western passage, it is a narrow corridor, closed for most of the time. As a consequence, this last *Hermès* can also be read as Serres' retrospective assessment of his previous works. Under the term 'passage,' we find Serres' confronting the question of the relation between languages and spaces anew but this time their borders (*bords*) have thickened. In such abyssal reality, the theme of translation reappears under the figure of quasi-untranslatability:

> The bridge is a path that connects two banks, or that makes a discontinuity continuous, or that crosses a fracture, or that patches a crack. The space of this itinerary [*parcours*] is interrupted by a river; it is not a space of transport. Consequently, there is no longer one space; there are two without common boundaries. *They are so different* that they require *a difficult, or dangerous, operator* to connect their boundaries […][163]

Starting from this spatial splintering, the emphasis of Serres' analysis has shifted from translatability to untranslatability, and thus from the transport of an invariant form, to *discourse* as an interstitial practice between this 'proliferation of spaces'. Bridges are required because spaces are first of all disjointed.[164] These passages, however, exceed what was previously examined under the heading of translation. They now designate

[161] Michel Serres, 'Où la promenade met en question les tableaux de l'exposition', *H5*, p. 106.
[162] Ibid., pp. 108-9.
[163] Michel Serres, 'Discours et parcours', *H4*, p. 200; 'Origin of Language, in *Hermès, Science, Philosophy' [...]*, p. 42. Emphasis mine. Translation modified.
[164] 'Discours et parcours', *H4*, p. 208.

forms of *writing*, and more particularly the narrative form. In 'Discours et Parcours', Serres reflects on Greek myths as forms of communication or connexion *before* 'the installation of rational discourse, [in] the times when spaces were badly connected',[165] when the 'outside' was a 'chaotic multiplicity of sociopolitical spaces.'[166] Odysseus is not, Serres writes, 'the discourse of an itinerary but radically, the itinerary of a discourse. The course, cursus, route, path passing through the originary disjunction.'[167] It is impossible to connect these spaces because they cannot form an homogeneous variety:[168] inaccessible islands, closed off cities, the discourse of mythical errantry remains the only way of joining these spaces. 'Discours' and 'parcours' resonate with Serres' reconfiguration of the system as a syrrhesis, accentuating the '-course' and hence the fluctuations of speech or writing rather than the transport or 'duction' of information.

Fragmentation, however, is not the end of the story. With topology, Serres remains in search of a formal aesthetic capable of seizing a global reality in its fluctuation, or what Alessandro Delco has called, a 'global morphology of interactions.'[169] For Serres, this means inserting oneself in the very texture of the fabric of nodes and relations that constitute 'culture' as an 'intersection of spatial varieties'. Although the concept of 'translation' loses its previous centrality, Serres remains, I wish to argue, within the coordinates of his *philosophy of translation*, which had always been a philosophy of the *passage*, albeit more or less smooth or problematic. The issue remains that of connecting regions, disciplines and localities, entities that can be considered, as in the example of ancient Greece, as *languages* as much as spaces, and thus within the coordinates of Serres' philosophy of relations. At the centre of Serres' analysis, however, is no longer a law, a norm or relative invariance, but an *operation*: in the absence of any possibility of exactitude, what remains is the 'solitary labour' of

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165 Ibid.

166 'The dispersion of Greek cities, reciprocally closed insularities, islands separated like the Sporades, in which 'man ' as such, *i.e.,* measure of all things, is inside, while animals, barbarians with growling languages circulate on the exterior of this political space ; chaotic multiplicity of sociopolitical spaces: the world before its formation, the practical world before the emergence of scientific knowledge.' (Ibid., p. 209; 'Origin of Language, in *Hermès, Science, Philosophy' [...]*, p. 51, translation modified) Such space was not a space of borders, but of frontiers, which could only be crossed or transcended through mythical narratives.

167 'Discours et parcours', *H4*, p. 206.

168 Ibid.

169 Alessandro Delcò, *Morphologies. A Partir Du Premier Serres*, (Paris : Editions Kimé, 1998)

connexions.[170] As Serres would later explain, '[b]eyond localized, rigorous, and regulated explications, there is a mobile globality that is often better expressed by narrative than by any theory.'[171] At the end of the *Hermès* trajectory what remains is the uncertain journey as wager, as narrative experience and as scientific experiment.

Communication and Untranslatability: Serres' Line of Flight

Moving from a linguistic-cybernetic communication paradigm, towards diverse forms of untranslatability, Serres' trajectory has shifted, broadly speaking, from a translation paradigm centred on the problem of identity to a translation paradigm based on literary experience and fragmentation. Yet, it is crucial to underscore that the latter is not defined through the experience (surrendering or overcoming) of the 'untranslatability ' of the Other, but precisely *against* it. The task of Serres' philosophy of translation is not to criticize *specific representation*s of the other (the other as barbarian, stranger or outsider) but to provide an alternative framework altogether, able to function as a *critique* of representation. The conspicuous absence of any reference to natural languages in connexion to translation does not merely indicate that this reflection is epistemological in nature; it demonstrates its *incompatibility* with the 'Bildung' (or hermeneutic) conceptions of translation. This is because Serres' 'borders' are entirely distinguished from geo-political or territorial frontiers. For Serres, borders (*bords*) are neither operators of identity nor of exclusion, but precisely,

[170] Serres gives the following description of 'culture': '[…] in general a culture constructs in and by its history an original intersection between such spatial varieties, a node of very precise and particular connexions. This construction, I believe, is that culture's very history. Cultures can be differentiated by the form of the set of its junctions, its appearance, its place, as well as by its changes of state, its fluctuations. But what they have in common and what constitutes them as such is the operation itself of joining, of connecting. The image of the weaver arises at this point: to link, to tie, to open bridges, pathways, wells, or relays among radically different spaces; to say (*dire*) what takes place between them; to inter-dict (*inter-dire*). The category of *between* is fundamental in topology and for our purposes here: to inter-dict in the rupture and cracks between varieties completely enclosed upon themselves. 'Enclosed' means isolated, closed, separated; it also means untainted, pure, and chaste. Now, that which is not chaste, incestus, can be incest. The incest prohibition (*inter-diction*) is, then, literally a local singularity exemplary of this operation in general, of the global project of connecting the disconnected, or the opposite, of opening what is closed, or again the opposite, and so forth. We find ourselves once again in the same domain through this general formal aesthetics. Therefore, we must speak about these difficult operations. The identity of a culture is to be read on a map, its identification card: this is the map of its homeomorphisms.' 'Discours et Parcours', *H4*, p. 202. Translated as 'Language and Space: From Oedipus to Zola' in *Hermès. Literature, Science, Philosophy*, p. 45. Translation modified.

[171] Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time: Michel Serres with Bruno Latour*, trans. by Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 115.

topological operators of passage. In contrast, various types of frontiers cannot be operators of passage because they function as structures of radical inversion: otherness or absolute finitude.

This point is made especially clear in Serres' review of *the Order of Things* (1966) which, through its vehement critique of Foucault, negatively illuminates Serres' own project. In this review, Serres criticizes Foucault on the terrain of his method, and more specifically, of his perspective on the classical age. As Serres explains, Foucault performs an archaeological critique of rationality and its 'subject' through the analysis of its regime of exclusion. As such, it is a political and philosophical critique of *autonomy*, of which ultimate horizon is a *heteronomy*. However, this critique (which Serres agrees with) relies on what Serres describes as a 'hyper-Platonician Coup.'[172] By this Serres means Foucault's treatment of finitude in terms of alterity, the positioning of his critique in a radical *outside* from where reason's ruse for domating Others is uncovered. Watching back the Classical Age from this distanced point, Foucault positions himself outside of the community of communication that the Classical Age was trying to establish. The universal is thereby 'naturalised into a cultural trait' and classical reason is 'frozen into an islet of which limit has been drawn'[173]. As a result, the 'autonomous is heteronomous, he is not judge, but object of an *ethnology*, since he is reduced to his region, he is not subject of Reason but determined by already prescribed cultural formations.'[174] For Serres, this reification of the Classical Age operates as inverted colonisation. To make Classical thought unthinkable is a way of perpetrating colonial ethnology: '[…] as if such or such culture were only circumscribed or defined when finished or remote, dead, or at least, for the observer, crystallized in the objective unconsciousness of what it essentially is.'[175] This is, for Serres, an extreme consequence of an 'external archaeology'.

In opposition to Foucault's, we have seen that Serres' aim was to 'translate' and reactivate classical thought, and analogously, to offer cultural 'relativism' a dynamic becoming. For Serres, 'dead languages' are never absolutely cut from us, they do not present themselves as pure epistemic impossibilities, but they need to be 'revivified

[172] Michel Serres, 'D'Erehwon à l'antre du Cyclope', *H1*, p. 196.
[173] Ibid., p. 195.
[174] Ibid., p. 195.
[175] Ibid., p. 199.

through another language', *i.e.* translated.[176] Serres turns the critique of Western metaphysics and reason against itself, defending translation against the installation in the infinite systems of inversion, mirrors and representation. If translation puts us in contact with a form of alterity, the latter definitely does not coincide with the Otherness that is socially and politically constituted through time. Outside the economy of violence and recognition, Serres draws on the plurality of languages as possible lines of flight and invention. Against Foucault, he considers that a critique of the metaphysics of representation that only *distances* the latter *to better circumscribe it* gets caught into its own trap. Beyond a mere inversion of the gaze, which perpetuates the mirroring of representation, Serres defends an expressive framework; one that does not merely reflect, but multiplies its vividness in thousands of shards.

Epilogue: Outliving Structuralism?

Throughout his early works, Serres has multiplied the variations on the concept of translation. 'Translation' evades any definite fixation but rather covers a *topique*, a range of uses, which, starting from identity or tautology extends to differential, difference, variation, transport, transformation, metaphor. By elaborating on translation as a relational operator, Serres brings us back to the semantic indetermination of the term. His philosophy can even be said to *proceed* from this very indetermination, translation functioning as a *paradigm* of relationality itself. By reframing communication metaphysically and then physically, Serres radicalized Leibniz's blurring of formal and natural languages. As a result, his conception of translation cannot be grasped from the standpoint of the two 'models' of translation we have laid out in the introduction. Indeed, the Monadology provided Serres with a theory of communication that both precedes *and* exceeds the theory of the *subject in communication*.

It is probably because Serres' philosophy depended on the notion of translation in such a fundamental way that he never entirely spelled it out conceptually, but only indicated its functionality in different settings. Whilst Serres' concept of translation remained intentionally underdetermined, his *philosophy* of translation can be argued to play a

[176] Ibid., p. 189.

very determinate *critical* role, both in connexion to French epistemology and in relation to structuralism. As Chapter IV has shown, Serres' philosophy of translation proved to be an important component of his critique of epistemology, which constituted its immediate background and primary justification. The main axes of Serres' reflections on epistemology are, on the one hand, the critique of 'externality' and, on the other, the recasting of the 'origin' of science as a translation, which effectively unsettles the nature-technique distinction. At the same time, Serres' philosophy of translation contributed to the increasing subversion of his structuralist point of departure. Not only did translation open up a channel of interferences between the theory of communication and the philosophy of structure, pointing to the fundamental impurity of every formalism; it also moved from a research of transcendental conditions towards a reflection grounded on historical and natural processes.

I have suggested that Serres' complex positioning in relation to the French 1960s philosophical moment was already at play in his doctoral thesis. Not only does this work in itself realise multiple syntheses but its theoretical orientation arguably shifted during the course of its writing. The fact that translation is only gradually integrated to the methodic apparatus of *The System of Leibniz* can be held as the *trace* of an ambivalence inherent to Serres' undertaking, from a project initially grounded in mathematics (Leibniz's mathematical dictionary), to an increasingly transdisciplinary one (encyclopedia).[177] By thinking Leibniz's system as a structure constituted of an entirely intra-referential language, I suggest that Serres *combined* the forces of the philosophy of structure with the conceptions of language developed at the time by the advocates of a 'philosophy of the concept.'[178] The 'universal language' he unravels is not *a* metalanguage because it contains an infinity of them. While J-A Miller negatively claimed that 'there is no exteriority to language from which it would be possible to take

[177] For his doctoral theis, Serres first sought to write an archaeology of structural algebra but he was progressively led to recompose the whole of Leibniz's philosophy. (Michel Serres, Martin Legros and Sven Ortoli, *Pantopie: De Hermès à Petite Poucette* (Paris: Editions Le Pommier, 2014), pp. 127-8) Mathematics was his entry point and remained the most precise and overall best paradigm for modelling the system. By introducing translation within the body of his methodic apparatus, he supplemented multilinearity with multivalence and formed a bridge between mathematics and the 'encyclopedia'. However, he 'erased his tracks' in the introduction, transfiguring what had started as a theoretical monument to mathematical structuralism, into a more complete and 'truly' decentered 'structuralism.'

[178] See : Peter Hallward, and Knox Peden, *Concept and Form, Volume 1: Selections from the Cahiers Pour l'Analyse* (London ; New York: Verso Books, 2012)

the latter as object',[179] Serres' model of language could be formulated as follows: *there is an interiority to language from which it is possible to take the latter as object.* Autonomous language *and* metalanguage, the system undoes itself, disintegrating the structure from within.[180] By ensuring a translational passage between the linguistic and the metaphysical, Serres paradoxically 'achieved' the creation of a *post-structural system*, that is, a coherent yet necessarily incomplete systematicity of open-ended multiplicities. Considering the significant absence of Serres from the literature on structuralism and post-structuralism, one may ask whether this translational structuralism is only a 'thing of the past' or if it may have inconspicuously 'outlived' structuralism.

[179] Jacques-Alain Miller quoted by Jacqueline Authier-Revuz, 'Le Fait autonymique: Langage, langue, discours. Quelques repères', in *Parler des mots: le fait autonymique en discours* (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2003), pp. 68-9.

[180] Following Maniglier, we may argue that the *undoing* of structure is in fact an integral component to structuralism's theoretical gesture. According to such a view, structuralism would be permanently transforming its own 'boundaries'. As Maniglier argues, the 'directing principle' of structuralism is to be found in 'the *passage* from a method to a philosophy, in the continuous overflow of theoretical programmes into speculative theses that are not always controlled: this overflow never achieves the constitution of a philosophy, but to the repetition of the enterprise […] into other theoretical programmes. Each time the interior excess of the non-philosophical towards the philosophical is rediscovered, stuttering, it is recovered in an insistent and compulsive gesture which remains, overall, opaque to those who accomplish it.' Patrice Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes*, p. 458. Translation mine.

PART 3

CHAPTER V

Translation, Expression and Systematicity in Benjamin's Early Works

> Although heterogeneous and fragmented, his work is so coherent that everything in it is at the same time centre and circumference.[1]

Walter Benjamin's philosophy plays a pivotal role in the articulation of our alternative genealogy of translation. Few essays have drawn as much scholarly attention as 'The Task of the Translator', which has now risen to the status of canonical text in translation theory. With its reference to Goethe, Pannwitz, Hölderlin and the Early Romantics, it is, Berman argues, the whole '*German* experience of translation' that converges in this text.[2] Thinking the critical actuality of Benjamin's essay hinges on the possibility of rooting it within the German 'tradition' whilst dissociating it from the movement of *Bildung*. This chapter will demonstrate that Benjamin's theory of language, combined with his critique of culture and historicism, can easily eclipse the passing reference he makes to the transformation of the 'self' through the 'foreign' in 'The Task of the Translator'. With Benjamin, translation acquires metaphysical, theological, even cosmic dimensions: it is a natural reality and a historical phenomenon. As a centrepiece of his reflections on language, this text is crucial for his philosophy as a whole. Rather than reading 'The Task of the Translator' from the predetermined scope of translation theory, this part takes the essay as point of departure and follows its theoretical ramifications and reappearances in Benjamin's later works. In doing so, the boundaries of the concept of translation will loosen up and progressively dissolve into what we will thereafter designate as Benjamin's 'metaphysics of expression'.

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[1] Irving Wohlfarth, 'Le "Médium" de L'histoire', *Etudes Germaniques*, 51 (1996), p. 102. Translation mine.

[2] Antoine Berman, *L'Age de la traduction, "La tâche du traducteur" de Walter Benjamin, un commentaire*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2008), p. 17.

It will be contended that Benjamin's 'metaphysics of expression' did not directly proceed from Leibniz's system of communication of substances but rather *indirectly*, via German Romanticism.[3] Initially, Benjamin's metaphysics of expression was theoretically composite, involving theological, scholastic and heterodox phenomenological elements. Through Leibniz, Benjamin gave it sharper contours as well as a greater philosophical and historical specificity. Explicit references to Leibniz and the *Monadology* intervene at several key moments in Benjamin's writings, most notably in the 'Epistemo-critical Prologue' of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* and in the 'Convolute N' of *The Arcade Project*. The reference to Leibniz had, we will see, various functions in the economy of Benjamin's thought. Not only did it provide Benjamin with a metaphysical, rather than purely theological, account of 'language as such' (*Sprache überhaupt*), it also offered Benjamin a firm, 'pre-critical' ground to rethink epistemology. As in Serres' case, Leibniz's metaphysics of expression proved pivotal in reinscribing knowledge within the linguistic-expressive materiality from which Kant had stripped it.

Together, Chapter V and Chapter VI will demonstrate the theoretical productivity of a reading that stresses the continuities between Benjamin's early ('metaphysical-theological') works in the philosophy of language and his later ('materialist') reflection on history, rather than analysing them as two incompatible dimensions of his thought. We will see that Benjamin's theory of translation as the 'afterlife of the work' constitutes an important mediating link between his early theory of language and the methodic concepts of readability, legibility, knowability so crucial to the *Arcade Project*. However, it is not the conception of translation alone but the entire expressive

[3] Questions of 'direct' and 'indirect' influences are fraught with uncertainty. The reception of Leibniz's works is particularly complex as his ideas were transmitted both via an official, academic channel through Christian Wolff, and another, more mystical interpretation of his philosophy, through Herder, Schelling and Novalis. According to Roger Ayrault, the reception of the *New Essays on the Human Understanding* in 1765 contributed to detaching the perception of Leibniz from its Wolffian systematic synthesis. 'In Herder, all knowledge is analogical; and if Novalis had not received, directly or indirectly, as the entire epoch, a certain way of reading Leibniz, he would not have gone back, from the Theodicy, to Böhme and Paracelse, and then to Plotinus and Plato.' Roger Ayrault, *La Genèse Du Romantisme Allemand I* (Paris: Aubier, 1961), p. 240. The possibility of this disjunctive reception was already inscribed in Leibniz's philosophy in so far as he himself grounded his rationalism both on a search for solidity in argumentation, and in the principle of analogy. See: Serres' own interpretation of the internal split of Leibniz's system, *infra*, p.132.

framework set up by Benjamin in his dissertation on Romanticism (1919) and transformed through the 'Task of the Translator' (1923) alongside other essays on the philosophy of language that continued to operate in Benjamin's 'materialist' problematization of history. For this reason, this part has as much to do with the 'afterlives' of Benjamin's essay on translation in his subsequent works, as with the configuration and transformation of his metaphysics of language.

1. Language as Medium

Translatability: The Task of the Translator I

'The Task of the Translator' is among the densest text of writing from Benjamin's early period. Completed in May 1921, this essay was first published in 1923 as a preface to his translations of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens*,[4] his second published book after *The Concept of Art Criticism in Early Romanticism*. Whilst Benjamin never again dedicated a full written piece to the problem of translation, his activities as a translator retained a central importance throughout his life. Next to Baudelaire, whom he started to translate as early as 1914, Benjamin's later translations include works by Proust (in tandem with Hessel), Balzac, Tristan Tzara, Saint-John Perse, Léon Bloy, Adrienne Monnier, Jouhandeau, and Aragon.[5] In his 1922 'announcement' for the journal *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin presented translation as a central component of his editorial concerns.[6] Throughout his life the consistent references to this preface, which he considered to be the 'first precipitate of [his] reflections on the theory of language',[7]

[4] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. The Story of a Friendship* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), pp. 99-100.

[5] The two translations of Proust's *Recherche* and 'Kleinere Übersetzungen' were published in three volumes of *Supplements* to the *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1987 & 1999).

[6] 'Once again, German writing in its current state stands in need of a genre that has always had a beneficial effect on it in its periods of great crisis: translation. In the present instance, however, the translations of the journal wish to be understood not just as providing models to be emulated, as was the case in earlier times, but also as the strict and irreplaceable school of language-in-the-making.' 'Announcement of the Journal *Angelus Novus*', *Selected Writings*, *Volume 1: 1913-1926* [hereafter *SW1*], ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2004), p. 294.

[7] Walter Benjamin, 'Curriculum Vitae (VI): Dr. Walter Benjamin', in *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940* [hereafter *SW4*], Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (eds.), (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2006), p. 381.

indicate that he regarded it as his first noteworthy achievement in the non-academic realm.[8] 'The Task of the Translator' is a singular attempt in Benjamin's oeuvre to find a point of convergence between his earlier researches on language, his translation activity, the Romantic and Goethean concepts of criticism, and his theological-metaphysical conceptions of truth, language, and history.

Despite the importance of Benjamin's activities as translator, there is, as Antoine Berman has underscored, an unbridgeable gap between his *theory* and his *practice* of translation. This hiatus corresponds to the move, in 'The Task of the Translator', from the experience of translation to its essence.[9] Such a 'task' has nothing to do with the subjective predispositions of the translator, just as the 'task of the critic', he would later repeat, has nothing to do with the strength of his personal 'opinion'.[10] The 'task' of the translator is primarily an objective task: an account of the relationships between an original and its translation as well as between languages themselves, rather than a set of guidelines for translators. Nevertheless, Benjamin does not simply move *beyond* translation theory; he preserves this very confrontation in the body of the text. The unfolding of his theory language is repeatedly interrupted by reflexive remarks concerning the classical account of translation (communication, fidelity, freedom, literalness), yet each time resumes its course in an almost dialogical way. This is perhaps the way in which Benjamin manifested the double orientation of his text: as preface and as self-sufficient essay, or as theory of translation and as metaphysics of language.[11] Addressing the translation exercise from the elevated standpoint of his

[8] This is how Benjamin would describe his interest in translation in 1928: 'From the very beginning, my studies were marked by an intensive preoccupation with French literature. This led to a number of translations, - Baudelaire, Proust- but above all to a recurrent interest in problems of translation associated with the philosophy of language. I attempted to engage these in an essay entitled "Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers" - the preface to my Baudelaire translation. 'Curriculum Vitae (III)', in *Selected Writings, Volume 2* [hereafter *SW2*]*: Part 2: 1931-1934*, Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (eds), (Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, 2005), p. 78.

[9] Antoine Berman, *L'Age de la traduction, "La tâche du traducteur" de Walter Benjamin, un commentaire*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2008), p. 35.

[10] 'The Task of the Critic', *SW2*, p. 548.

[11] The presence of these two simultaneous perspectives on the text explains the great difficulty of its commentary. For the latter needs, as much as possible, to remain on the tension line between these two, to illuminate the task of the translator through the philosophy of language, and to transform the philosophy of language through the translation problem, without either conflating the two or falling on either side. More generally, this will prove to be a fundamental difficulty for the present chapter, as it seeks to inscribe Benjamin's concept of translation within the broader context of his oeuvre whilst preserving the specificity of its problematic. This specificity cannot only be defined in relation to Benjamin's own philosophy, but must be

theology of language, the 'task' of the translator is only truly solved at the end of the essay – with the *dissolution* of the task itself, rather than with the effectuation of a specific translation. The stakes of translation are not to be sought in the 'horizontality' of linguistic difference, but rather in their opening up at a point of flight to 'truth'. As a consequence, the task of the translator connects two different spheres: a historical one, which is rooted in the problem of form (and hinges on the concepts of 'life' and 'afterlife' or 'continued life' (*Fortleben*)) and a metaphysical one, which depends on a messianic concept of truth.

Benjamin begins 'The Task of the Translator' by discrediting the communicational paradigm of translation. Defining translation as the transmission of the content of a work to readers 'who do not understand the original' is irrelevant, for artworks do not *communicate*, they do not aim to 'serve' their reader.[12] His theory of translation is thereby immediately bound to his theory of art and art criticism. As the Romantic theory of the artwork, the theory of translation is 'the theory of its form':[13]

> Translation is a form. To seize it as such one must go back to the original. For the latter contains the law of this form, whereby its translatability is contained.[14]

Translatability is defined both as the 'essential quality of certain works' and as the 'manifestation' or 'expression' (*Äusserung*) of a 'specific meaning inherent in the original' (*bestimmte Bedeutung*).[15] Translatability must therefore be grasped, Benjamin continues, as a relational concept (*Relationsbegriff*).[16] With this term, Benjamin evokes the *relatio* of phenomenological theories of intentionality whilst immediately neutralizing this connotation. Although translatability may be grasped as a certain 'directedness towards,' this relation does not have definite conditions of validity. '[…]

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accessible from what we might call a point 'outside' of Benjamin's works, in order to enter into dialogue with the other parts of the thesis.

[12] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator [hereafter: *TT*]', *SW1*, p. 253.

[13] Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism [hereafter: *CC*]', *SW1*, p. 155.

[14] *TT,* p. 254. Translation modified. *'Übersetzung ist eine Form. Sie als solche zu erfassen, gilt es zurückzugehen auf das Original. Denn in ihm liegt deren Gesetz als in dessen Übersetzbarkeit beschlossen.'* Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhauser (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989), vol. 4, n°1, [hereafter *GS4*] p. 9.

[15] *TT*, p. 254.

[16] Ibid., Translation modified.

certain relational concepts retain their meaning, and possibly their foremost significance, if they are not from the outset used exclusively with reference to man.'[17] Translatability is neither intentionally directed to men, nor conditionally bound to its actualization: this 'predicate' passes beyond them in so far as it is an absolute necessity (or *in God*). For Benjamin, the various phenomenological, expressive and metaphysical 'relations' at stake in translation have an objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*) that needs to be radically disentangled from intersubjective communication and reinscribed in a larger cosmos. The intelligibility of translation is not to be sought in a language's capacity of communicating messages but in the life of artworks and of languages.

Benjamin addresses the temporal determination of the artwork through the concept of life. A translation marks the time of the afterlife of a work, its connexion to the original being fundamentally temporal or processual: '[…] a translation issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its survival (*Überleben*).' As he explains, 'a translation comes later than the original, and since the significant works of literature never find their chosen translators at the time of their origin, their translation marks the stage of their survival (*Fortleben*).'[18] As Samuel Weber observes, 'Fortleben' not only indexes a living on, but also a living away, alluding both to a continuation of the life of the work and to its remoteness.[19] Such 'life' is especially obvious in the case of literary masterpieces, which have progressively reached, through their fame (*Ruhm*), a state of 'eternal afterlife' (*ewigen Fortleben*). In 'translations that are more than transmission of subject matter […] the life of the originals attains its latest, continually renewed, and most complete unfolding'.[20] With their organic, historical and theological connotations, the concepts of life and afterlife constitute the theoretical fulcrum of the entire essay. Translations are the transient expressions of an artwork's 'eternal living-on', and, as such, the relation between original and translation is characterized as a 'connexion of life' (*Zusammenhang des Lebens*). The claim that artworks and translations are *living* not only means that, as life itself, they are oriented by a 'special

[17] Ibid., Translation modified.
[18] *TT*, p. 254.
[19] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2008) p. 67. The distinction between 'Fort-', 'Über-' and 'Nach-' leben is subject to controversy in the secondary literature. It will be argued that whilst 'Nachleben' is a retrospective term alluding to a life that *will have come after*, 'Fortleben' indicates a living-away or living-off from the standpoint of the present. See *supra*, pp. 227-228.
[20] *TT*, p. 255.

high purposiveness', it also denotes the precision of this process and the quasi-organic articulateness of translation. Indeed, the *Zusammenhang des Lebens* is a lively nexus, which associates the systematic character of language to that of a process, hence to a specific form of *historicity*. At once a figure of limit and of historical specificity, the concept of life encapsulates the metaphysical problem of individuation in Benjamin's early philosophy.

> Translatability is an essential quality of certain works, which is not to say that it is essential for the works themselves that they be translated; it means, rather, that a specific meaning (*bestimmte Bedeutung*) inherent in the original manifests (*Äusserung*) itself in its translatability.[21]

Whilst a translation manifests the meaning (*Bedeutung*) contained in its original, all linguistic life is endowed with the ultimate purpose of 'expressing its (own) essence' (*Ausdruck seines Wesens*). The finality of language so conceived goes past the 'meaning' of a 'content' to become fundamentally 'presentation' (*Darstellung*). Whereas the work of art's underlying finality is the 'presentation of its signification' (*Darstellung seiner Bedeutung*), a translation's ultimate purpose is to 'express the innermost relationship of languages to one another'[22]. By producing a temporary solution to the foreignness of languages, translation fleetingly discloses an 'intentionless' language or 'pure language', which heralds the messianic end of languages' history. Displacing the question of translation from the register of communication to that of manifestation (*Äusserung*), Benjamin expands the domain of the 'linguistic' into a metaphysics of expression. An *essential quality* of determinate artworks, translatability is the *sign* of something else, namely the interrelated being of languages once stripped of their particular determinations. The entire text circulates through this expressive motif, of which the 'pure language', expressed by all, is the ultimate and only definitive moment. However, this ascending dynamic is counteracted by the motif of 'extinction' of meaning; the *expressionless*. Depending on the perspective, translation is the resurrection of the artwork or the death of the original. Every translation subdues its original as it can only come into existence through the death of the original's intentions. Translations cannot in turn be translated because in them the original has been 'transplanted in a more

[21] *TT*, p. 254.
[22] *TT*, p. 255.

definitive linguistic realm, ironically more definitive.'[23] They have been composed with a language that is 'inadequate, immense and foreign' (*unangemessen, gewaltig und fremd*),[24] a language that Hölderlin's translation of Sophocles epitomizes.[25] Each translation exhausts its original by fixing the artwork under a single, determinate perspective about its 'truth'. 'This disjunction' between form and content 'prevents translation and at the same time makes it superfluous. For any translation of a work originating in a specific stage of linguistic history represents (*repräsentiert*), in regard to a specific aspect of its content, translation into all other languages.'[26] By capturing a single yet total articulation of the sense of a given work, translation operates as a passageway through all languages.

The previous analysis shows that Benjamin articulates the translator's task against the backdrop of a larger system of expression. Expression is not defined as a certain form of language, on the contrary; it is expression that appears to be the primitive ontological 'reality'. This thesis is at the kernel of the two-part letter that Benjamin sent to Scholem in 1916, which contains Benjamin's earliest exposition of his philosophy of language. 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man' endorses an expressive ontology, according to which the 'existence of language is coextensive [...] with absolutely everything.'[27] In opposition to what he considers to be the essential instrumentality of the 'bourgeois conception of language', this essay, which takes its point of departure in the first chapter of Genesis, is avowedly mystical. Countering the thesis of the arbitrary nature of the sign, it reconnects language to the 'spiritual essence' (*geistige Wesen*) of things, re-establishing a necessary connexion between words and things. Languages, for the young Benjamin, is not made of words addressed among men with factual realities as objects.[28] 'Languages have no speakers',[29] and they cannot be instruments for they merely convey themselves. Essentially, language is the 'communicable' part of the creation, the aspect of 'spiritual being' that can be shared, im-parted (*mit-teilt*). Therefore, language is communicability pure and simple. The

[23] *TT*, p. 258.
[24] *TT*, p. 258.
[25] *TT*, p. 262.
[26] *TT*, p. 258.
[27] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man [hereafter: *LS*]', in *SW1*, p. 62.
[28] *LS*, p. 65.
[29] *LS*, p. 63.

entire essay revolves around the idea of language as *medium*, which can be grasped as the methodological correlate of this ontology. The concept of medium arises from the collapse of the differentiation between the 'means' and 'ends' of language, i.e. between 'expression' (*Ausdruck*) and 'communication' (*Mitteilung*):

> […] every language communicates itself in itself; it is in the purest sense the "medium" of the communication. The medial, which is the immediacy [*Unmittel*barkeit] of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of linguistic theory, and if one wishes to call this immediacy "magical," then the primary problem of language is its magic. At the same time, the notion of the magic of language points to something else: its infinitude. It is conditioned by its immediacy. For precisely because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore every language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely articulated infinitude [*inkommensurable, einziggeartete Unendlichkeit*]. Its linguistic essence, not its verbal content, designates its limit.[30]

The entire essay can be summarized in the lexical opposition between 'Mitteilung' (communication) and 'Unmittelbarkeit' (immediacy).[31] Benjamin seeks to ground communication outside of mediation as such, in an unmediated linguistic and communicational realm. This constitutes the 'magic' of language and its incommensurable infinitude.

At the overlapping point between theology and the philosophy of language, Benjamin models his concept of language upon its double function in Genesis: as 'creative' and 'finished creation', or 'word and name.'[32] To argue that the linguistic is one with 'spiritual being' is not to say, as with mystics, that the word is the essence of things,[33] but rather that 'the uninterrupted flow of this communication runs through the whole of nature, from the lowest forms of existence to man and from man to God.'[34] From this departure point, however, the essay splits into two different scenarios. In the first

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[30] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhauser (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989), vol. 2 [hereafter *GS2*], p. 143. Translation by Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 138.

[31] Benjamin played on the quasi-homonymy of the middle part of these words: 'Mitteil' and 'Mittel'. 'Mitteilen' literally means 'sharing with', whereas 'das Mittel' (the means) becomes 'mittelbar' (with a means, indirect), and 'unmittelbar', 'direct', 'immediate'. For a detailed analysis of these terms, see: Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge & London, 2008), p. 41.

[32] *LS*, p. 68.

[33] *LS*, p. 69.

[34] *LS*, p. 74.

part,[35] remaining within the bounds of the first and second chapters of Genesis, Benjamin focuses on the possibility of a true mediation or analogical passage between the divine and the human worlds through the name, which epitomizes the ('magical') *immediacy* of spiritual communication. Creation is mute, and the knowledge of man 'completes' it by naming nature. 'God's creation is completed when things receive their names from man, from whom in name language alone speaks.'[36] By naming nature, man *knows* it. Whilst proper names relate the finite language of men to the infinite language of God, words are the names that relate the human world and the language of things.[37] The language of names is thus a vector of communication between the worlds. Translation, too, is a passage from the language of things into the language of man and the name, and this translation is 'guaranteed by God.'[38] This passage between different expressive strata is compared to a passage between 'media of varying densities', a 'translation' across incommensurable and singularly infinite languages. In this earliest characterization of translation, what primarily matters for Benjamin is to establish the continuity between different stratas of language, which form different densities of the same spiritual and expressive medium. As Benjamin writes, '[t]ranslation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract areas of identity and similarity.'[39]

In the second part of the essay,[40] Benjamin moves beyond the two first chapters of Genesis. From the viewpoint of language, the Fall means above all a fall 'into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication.'[41] As Benjamin asserts, 'the Fall marks the birth of the *human word*, in which name no longer lives intact and which has stepped out of name-language, the language of knowledge, from what we may call its own immanent magic, in order to become expressly, as it were externally, magic.'[42] This is the Babelian time of 'linguistic confusion' and of the 'enslavement of language in prattle'.[43] The silence of nature does not express the perfection of creation anymore but the infinite mourning of its proper naming;[44] nature has become the symbol of the

[35] *LS*, pp. 62-70.
[36] *LS*, p. 65.
[37] *LS*, p. 69.
[38] *LS*, p. 70.
[39] *LS*, p. 70.
[40] *LS*, pp. 70-74.
[41] *LS*, p. 72.
[42] *LS*, p. 71.
[43] *LS*, p. 72.
[44] *LS*, p. 73.

inexpressible.[45] As Wohlfarth aptly notes, Benjamin interprets the theological notion of the fall in terms of the 'fall' into the bourgeois conception of language and the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign.[46]

The concept of *medium* encapsulates the metaphysical stakes of Benjamin's early philosophy of language. At the intersection of his mathematical reflections on the infinite,[47] his theory of colour, his theory of 'the experience of an immanent totality', the 'medium' refers to a wider nexus of which language only seems to be an instance.[48] In light of 'On Language as Such', however, we could also surmise that the notion of 'medium' enables Benjamin to develop a generalised conception of expression, which integrates various 'languages' - be they linguistic languages or 'silent' languages of things - and *translates* them among one another. Each medium contains its own immanent infinity, which is at once spiritual and spatial; it is therefore immediate in itself (absolute). Yet, each medium plays a 'mediating' role in relation to other media as part of a single continuum (that of 'spirit' or 'language as such'). Although 'On Language' constitutes the highest point of Benjamin's early mystical philosophy, a mysticism that would progressively wane, the concept of medium as well as the generalised expressive paradigm set up here, do remain operative in his later works. In order to understand the transformation of his conception of expression between 'On Language as Such' and the preface on translation it is necessary to take a detour via Benjamin's doctoral dissertation. Through his investigation of the Romantic theory of reflection and art criticism, Benjamin articulated the concept of the medium, not only as an immanent, infinite absolute, but also as a systematically-oriented whole. Indeed,

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[45] *LS*, p. 74.

[46] Wohlfarth observes that 'Such a Mit-teilung divides language from the others, instead of communicating it integrally to God. True communication here loses its "common grounding in linguistic spirit", and intersubjectivity becomes a mere transaction between private subjects – deprived from their community in the Word.' Irving Wohlfarth, 'Le "Médium" de l'histoire', in *Etudes Germaniques* 51, no. 1 (1996), p. 109. Translation mine.

[47] For a thorough analysis of the relationship between medium, density and Cantorian mathematics, see: Peter Fenves, *Arresting Language: From Leibniz to Benjamin* (Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 205-215.

[48] This view is held by Howard Caygill, who writes: 'Prime among these is the assumption that the core of Benjamin's thought is the philosophy of language, and that it is above all a linguistic 'metacritique' of Kant. This interpretation excludes many important aspects of Benjamin's thought, and fails to recognise that his concept of experience is not exclusively linguistic; indeed his 'transcendental but speculative philosophy' is above all an account of experience characterised by an immanent totality. Language offers but one transcendental surface for the exploration of the properties of this totality.' Howard Caygill, *Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 13.

what will be argued in the following sections is that in the course of his doctoral dissertation, Benjamin turned expression into a speculative *method*.

Romantic Reflection

In recent scholarship on Benjamin's *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism*, a lot of emphasis has been placed on its *reconstruction*, sometimes elliptical and inaccurate, of the thought of the Early Romantics.[49] Benjamin's doctoral thesis is a 'construction' in the emphatic sense that Benjamin would later give to this term. Benjamin does not simply analyse the Early German Romantic concept of art criticism genetically, as a set of theses and arguments endorsed by Schlegel, Novalis after Fichte and Kant. As he himself underscores, his thesis focuses on a 'problem-historical task' pertaining to their *concept* of criticism. The connexion of the concept of criticism to its *problem*, and in particular, to its 'epistemological presuppositions,' is the true object of his study.[50]

According to Benjamin, Early Romantic philosophy is rooted in Fichte's conception of reflection: '[t]hinking that reflects on itself in self-consciousness is the basic fact from which Schlegel's and, in large part, Novalis' epistemological considerations take their start.'[51] Benjamin stresses that for the Fichte of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (1794), reflection is an immediate but not yet an *intuitive* activity. Indeed, for the early Fichte, as well as for the Romantics, reflection is a relation between two forms: '[i]t is a question *not* of the knowledge of an object through intuition, but of the self-knowledge

[49] As Winfried Menninghaus argues, by establishing reflection as immediate, infinite, and pertaining to presentational forms, Benjamin overlooked important parts of Fichte, Novalis, and some of Schlegel's developments on the theory of knowledge. (Winfried Menninghaus, 'Walter Benjamin's Exposition of the Romantic Theory of Reflection', trans. Robert J. Kiss, in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, eds. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (New York and London Continuum, 2002), pp. 19-50.) Menninghaus rectifies Benjamin's account as follows: '[…] the concept of reflection is encountered in the context of art theory far less often even than within the Romantics' general theory of cognition or metaphysics. And where it is to be found, it often works in favour of the more common understanding which sees in Romantic reflection primarily an unartistic manner of self-thematization or of making statements about a work of art within it – not, however, the integral and constitutive principle of art itself.' (p. 42) Menninghaus' assessment is not, however, wholly negative, as he concedes in his conclusion that Benjamin's bending of the sources did not prevent him from 'deriving' valid 'cardinal concepts of Romantic poetology'. (p. 50)

[50] *CC*, pp. 116-117; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhauser (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main : Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989), vol. 1 [hereafter *GS1*], p. 11.

[51] *CC*, p. 120.

of a method, of something formal.'[52] (*Nicht um die Erkenntnis eines Gegenstandes durch Anschauung, sondern um die Selbsterkenntnis einer Methode, eines Formalen*) According to Benjamin, it is in its 'radical, mystical formalism' that Fichte's theory displays 'the most profound affinity with the early Romantic theory of art.'[53] Indeed, Fichte's theory announces the dissolution of the distinction between knowledge and method of knowledge, which would be brought to fruition in the writings of the Jena Romantics' theory of art.[54] Whereas in his subsequent texts, Fichte would ground reflection in the self-positing of the 'I' as a way of holding in check the infinite mirroring of reflexivity, the Romantics did not reject the infinite character of reflection excluded by Fichte.[55] By detaching reflection from the 'I' of the original positing, the Romantics made of reflection a 'mere thinking oneself', which could thereupon attach itself to any given 'self'. As Benjamin writes, if the *act* of thinking precedes its substrate, 'every simple reflection arises absolutely from a point of indifference (*Indifferenzpunkt*). One is at liberty to ascribe to this indifference-point of reflection whatever metaphysical quality one likes.'[56] From the primary principle of reflection, where thought reflects itself in a 'monistic act' in which it is actively self-thought (and hence *knows*), the Romantics could infer the knowledge of everything.[57] Thus, '[t]he medium of reflection turns into the system, the *methodological* absolute into the *ontological* absolute'. This is what Benjamin describes as the Romantic theory of object-knowledge (*Gegenstandserkenntnis*):[58] since everything that is in the absolute is reflected in the

[52] *CC*, p. 122; *GS1*, p. 21.Translation modified.
[53] *CC*, p. 123. Translation modified.
[54] Distancing the Romantic theory of knowledge from Fichte's 'intellectual intuition' is of central importance to Benjamin, insofar as he is thinking within the coordinates of his 'Programme for the Coming Philosophy' (1918), seeking to rethink epistemology from the standpoint of language. What is at stake in the passage between these two forms of knowledge is Benjamin's transformation of Romantic reflection, from a reflexivity that retains the character of a 'reflective consciousness', to one that would have the character of a language.
[55] *CC*, p. 123.
[56] *CC*, p. 134.
[57] There is an argumentative gap here, which is hard to understand: 'That this simple reflection, however, this thinking of thinking, is a priori conceived by the Romantics as a knowledge of thinking rests on the fact that they presuppose the initial, original, material thinking – that is, sense- as already fulfilled. On the basis of this axiom, the medium of reflection turns into the system, the methodological absolute into the ontological absolute.' (*CC,* 144) In connexion to the theory of art, he later indicates that reflection is 'absolutely creative, filled with content.' (*CC,* 149; *GS1*, 54) This idea is not without connexions to the famous footnote by Benjamin, concerning the 'messianic standpoint' of Romanticism, where Benjamin quoting Charlotte Pingoud, refers to a the religious standpoint of Schlegel as the imperative of a 'fulfillment at every point of existence' (*CC*, note 3, pp. 185-6)
[58] *GS1*, p. 55.

medium, 'everything real, thinks' [59] This absolute remains nevertheless wholly constituted, or rather, *filled* by thinking.[60] In reflection, the knowledge of an object depends upon its self-knowledge, which abolishes the distinction between being known by oneself and being known by another, since 'both are only relative unities of reflection.'[61] According to Benjamin, there can be no 'knowledge of an object by a subject. Every instance of knowing is an immanent connexion in the absolute, or, if one prefers, in the subject.'[62] Romantic reflections must therefore be gasped as moments of 'intensification' or 'potentiation', which incorporate 'other beings, other centres of reflection [...] into their own self-knowledge.'[63] Arguing that '[r]eflection constitutes the absolute, and it constitutes it as a medium,'[64] Benjamin immediately adds that 'Schlegel did not use the term 'medium' himself; nonetheless, he attached the greatest importance to the constantly uniform connexion in the absolute or in the system, both of which we have to interpret as the connectedness of the real, not in its substance […] but in the degrees of its clear unfolding.[65] Since the medium is continuous, potentiation can be grasped as a light passing between different media as between different coloured pads; it is a qualitative change without a substantial transition.[66] As such, translation, criticism and 'Romanticization' are closely related. They are all forms of qualitative change in continuity.[67]

The Romantic conception of the knowledge of objects (*Gegenstanderkenntnis*) encompasses both the knowledge of artworks and the knowledge of nature. Without distinction between subject and object, the 'observation' of nature becomes a type of magical observation (*Beobachtung*), where perception and method of research coincide:

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[59] *CC*, p. 144.
[60] *CC*, p. 144.
[61] *CC*, pp. 145-6.
[62] *CC*, p. 146.
[63] *CC*, p. 146.
[64] *CC*, p. 132.
[65] *CC*, p. 133.
[66] This notion of translation brings us back to the aforementioned passage in 'On Language as Such', in which Benjamin defined the 'difference between languages' as 'those of media that are distinguished as it were by their density – that is, gradually.' *LS*, p. 66.
[67] In both cases (Romanticization and translation), it is Novalis' name that is invoked. See: *CC*, pp. 133 & 154.

> *The medium of reflection, that of knowing, and that of perceiving coincide for the Romantics*. The term "observation" alludes to this identity of media; what is distinguished as perception and method of research in the normal experiment is united in magical observation, which is itself an experiment; for this theory, it is the only possible experiment."[68]

The verb 'beobachten', which means at once observing, noticing and seeing, as well as 'passive' and 'active' forms of perception, is crucial here. Rather than 'questioning' nature, observation 'fixes […] the self-knowledge nascent in the object'.[69] For Benjamin, this grounding in the object's self-reflexivity proves especially fruitful in the criticism of art, where criticism can only be exercised *immanently* and *positively*.[70] Indeed, according to Benjamin, the Romantics' decisive contribution to the theory of art is their discovery of a 'precisely determined concept of the work'[71] as a formal correlate of their conception of positive criticism:

> [F]orm is the objective expression, which is to the work its own reflection, the reflection that constitutes its essence. Form is the possibility of reflection in the work. It grounds the work apriori, as a principle of existence; it is through its form that the work of art is a living centre of reflection. In the medium of reflection, in art, new centres of reflection are continually forming. Each time, according to their spiritual seed, they embrace, as they reflect, larger or smaller contexts [*Zusammenhänge*].[72]

For Benjamin, the Jena Romantics' new conception of poetic forms appears at its clearest in their translations, which illuminate their appropriation of Romance linguistic 'forms'. As he would continue arguing in 'The Task of the Translator', one of the specificities of the Romantics' attitude to translation was to aim to a certain linguistic 'transparency' through literalness, rather than starting from meaning. Benjamin considers Romantic translations as self-justificatory pieces of theory, which by making a 'pure and universal' usage of linguistic forms, are analogous to art criticism.[73]

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[68] *CC*, p. 148. Emphasis mine

[69] *CC*, p. 148.

[70] 'For not only did Schlegel's concept of criticism achieve freedom from heteronomous aesthetic doctrines, but it made this freedom possible in the first place by setting up for artworks a criterion other than the rule – namely, the criterion of an immanent structure specific to the work itself.' *CC*, p. 155.

[71] *CC*, p. 155.

[72] *CC*, p. 156; *GS1*, p. 73.Translation modified.

[73] However, Benjamin observes that the philosophical correlate of the Romantics 'liberal formalism' is a purely *formal* and *a priori* interplay. Contrasting shapes (*Gebilde*) to forms, Benjamin at once echoes and contradicts Serres' account of Romantic forms in 'Structure and Importation' (Cf: *infra*, pp. 91-96). For Benjamin, the Romantics, not the *Classiques*, are the

Away from any 'standard of judgement', the Romantics' conception establishes the 'centre of gravity' of criticism in the *relational* whole in which the artwork is entangled.[74] '[I]ts central intention is not judgement but, on the one hand, the completion, consummation, and systematization of the work and, on the other hand, its resolution in the absolute'.[75] At the same time, the Romantic conception of reflection leads to a number of 'irresolvable contradictions' related to the 'problem of primordial reflection,' but also to the problem of potentiation, which forbids any possibility of retrogression: 'Only a breaking off, never a lessening, or heightened reflection is thinkable.'[76] The Romantics' adoption of the absolute as standpoint is the downside of the formalisation of reflection announced in the first place. Because of the essential 'ambiguity' attached to reflection beyond its first two moments, Romantic reflection turns into 'formless thinking' and leads to the 'dissolution of the particular form of reflection in the face of the absolute.'[77] This Romantic notion of a 'medial' absolute is ultimately overshadowed by its incapacity to preserve the integrity of the original form of reflection, the particular artwork. Indeed, the dissolution of the Fichtean 'I' in the Romantic Absolute does not dissolve subjectivity altogether, and the latter ends up eclipsing the autonomy of the artwork.

Benjamin's philosophy would progressively realise the separation of these two moments (potentiation and resolution), elaborating on the interruptive and destructive aspects of criticism. In 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', this operation would take the form

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first 'moderns' who freed forms from the tyranny of archetypes: 'Form did not count for the Romantics either as a rule in itself or even as dependent on rules. This conception, without which the truly important work of A. W. Schlegel in translating from Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese is unthinkable, was the focus of his brother's philosophical intentions. Every form as such counts as a peculiar modification of the self-limitation of reflection; it needs no other justification (*Rechtfertigung*), because it is not a means to the representation of content. The Romantics' endeavors to reach purity and universality in the use of forms rests on the conviction that, by critically setting free the condensed potential and many-sidedness of these forms (by absolutizing the reflection bound up in them), the critic will hit upon their connectedness as moments within the medium. The idea of art as a medium thus creates for the first time the possibility of an undogmatic or free formalism – a liberal formalism, as the Romantics would say. Early Romantic theory grounds the validity of forms independently of the ideal of determinate shapes (*Gebilde*). To determine the entire philosophical bearing of this attitude, in its positive and negative aspects, is one of the main tasks of the present essay. (*CC* p. 158; *GS1* p. 77. Translation modified.)

[74] *CC*, p. 159.
[75] *CC*, p. 159.
[76] *CC* note 146, p. 192.
[77] *CC*, p. 129.

a 'conjuration of semblance'. Hostile to the quiet refuge of semblance, Benjamin writes that it is 'the expressionless' (das *Ausdrucklose*) that 'compels the trembling harmony to stop and through its objection immortalizes its quivering'[78]. Against infinite reflection and dissolution, the 'critical violence' of the expressionless operates a caesura in the work of art. In this passage it is rhythm, in opposition to expression, which releases the 'eternity of the content' of the work.[79] In the dissertation, the theme of the destructive character is taken up in a section devoted to Romantic irony whilst the question of discontinuity is addressed through a comparison between the Romantics and Goethe's ontology of Art. For the Romantics, the idea of art is the 'medium of reflection of forms,' *i.e.* its unity is a function of its continuity.[80] Goethe's 'forms', the 'ideals' are, in opposition to the Romantic idea of art, intrinsically discontinuous. Instead of equating unity and infinity, Goethe reasons in terms of 'primal images' (*Urbilder*). As Benjamin argues, Goethe's artistic ideal 'can be grasped only in a limited plurality' or 'harmonic discontinuum of pure contents.'[81] 'Just as, in contrast to the idea, the inner structure of the ideal is discontinuous, so, too, the connexion of this ideal with art is not given in a medium but is designated by a refraction (*Brechung*).' However, if Goethe's theory does not imply the dissolution of individual works, it is principally because 'there is no transition from the archetypal realm to the single works,'[82] and therefore no opening to criticism within the works themselves.[83] The ideal is an unconditioned archetype and a Platonic idea over against single works can only exist contingently.[84] Whereas 'The Romantics define the relation of artworks to art as infinity in totality [...] Goethe defines it as unity in plurality'.[85] Benjamin thus contrasts a formal idea of art grounded in the infinity of connectedness between artworks (infinity of reflection in the totality of relations) to the ideals, or 'primal images' of art which are only discontinuously connected to particular artworks. Whilst in the first case the artwork is a fragment, a *pars totalis* engaged in an infinite process of completion-incompletion; in the second case it is better grasped as a torso

[78] Walter Benjamin, 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', *SW1*, p. 340.
[79] Benjamin's models for this 'expressionless' power were, on the one hand, Hölderlin's hymnic poetry and, on the other, the silence of the hero in tragedy. Ibid., p. 341.
[80] *CC*, p. 165.
[81] *CC*, p. 179.
[82] *CC*, p. 181.
[83] *CC*, p. 179.
[84] *CC*, p. 181.
[85] *CC*, p. 183.

against the backdrop of the ideal that it 'presents' yet cannot be, and from which it is therefore fundamentally distanced.[86]

The Medium as *Hilfskonstruktion*

Benjamin explains that the notion of 'level of clarity' in the *Reflexionmedium* is a *Hilfskonstruktion*, an auxiliary construct, 'serving to render more logical a line of thought that was not thought through by the Romantics with full clarity.'[87] Among the various functions played by the *Reflexionmedium* in the economy of his argument, it is meant to underline the distinction between the Fichtean and the Romantic infinite. In opposition to the 'infinite series of mirror-images' in which Fichte's 'I' threatens to fall, Romantic reflection is 'full', fulfilling itself a little more at each stage until it reaches perfect continuity in the Absolute.[88] By contrast to the 'bad infinite' of Fichte, Romantic reflection is characterized by an increase of reality content.[89] Arguably, the notion of medium enables the visualization of the specific 'spatiality' of the Absolute, without 'space',[90] a spatiality upon which the non-linear temporality of art criticism can be subsequently grounded. In order to mark this distinction, Benjamin uses the term '*Zusammenhang'* in contrast with the linearity of *Fortgang* (advance) or *Fortschnitt* (progress):[91] 'the infinity of reflection, for Schlegel and Novalis, is not an infinity of continuous advance but an infinity of connectedness' (*Unendlichkeit des Zusammenhanges*).[92] Benjamin underlines that the 'temporal infinity' of progressive

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[86] For an astute analysis of the opposition between presentation and representation in connexion to the Goethean ideal, see David S. Ferris, 'Benjamin's Affinity, Goethe, the Romantics and the Pure Problem of Criticism', in, *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. Beatrice Hanssen and Andrew Benjamin (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), p.185.

[87] *CC*, p. 130.

[88] In a footnote to his description of Schlegel's conception of the absolute as a "medium of reflection", Benjamin added this interesting remark: "The ambiguity of the designation in this case entails no lack of clarity. For, on the one hand, *owing to its continuous context*, reflection itself is a medium, and, on the other hand, the medium in question is one such that reflection moves within it – for reflection, as the absolute, moves within itself.' (*CC*, p. 189.)

[89] *CC*, p. 130.

[90] As Anthony Phelan pointed out: "In attempting to (re)construct a dimension of Romantic thought never properly developed by Schlegel and Novalis themselves, it is perhaps significant that Benjamin borrows the term *Hilfskonstruktion* from geometry, given that the scheme of reflexivity he finds in Romantic thought is conceived in spatial terms, or in terms of a spacing; its geometrical sense leaves open the question of how the real enfolded as content if 'the reflections' is to be substantially understood." Anthony Phelan, '*Fortgang* and *Zusammenhang*: Walter Benjamin and the Romantic Novel' in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, p. 75.

[91] Anthony Phelan, '*Fortgang* and *Zusammenhang*', p. 71.

[92] *CC*, p. 126.

universal poetry is a 'medial and qualitative infinity'.[93] Although infinite and continuous, this infinite medium constitutes a fully *determinate* relational nexus. For Benjamin, it is Hölderlin who captured this idea with most acuity in his commentary on the Pindar fragments: '*unendlich (genau) Zusammenhängen'.* These connexions not only 'run through in all directions', they are also 'exact', or 'systematic'.[94] Their relational character, however, does not imply mediation. 'It is thus a matter of mediation through immediacies', in which each transition is a 'leap'. [95]

It is only in the third section ('System and Concept') that the medium of reflection's full philosophical significance appears. In this section, Benjamin thematizes the apparent paradox of addressing systematically a corpus that does not immediately present itself as a system. Confronted with the enigmatic consistency of this ensemble of fragments, essays and lectures, Benjamin argues that their thinking can be 'set in relation to systematic lines of thought […] and inserted into a properly chosen system of coordinates'. [96] Without constituting a system, their writings are systematically oriented. This orientation is most apparent in Schlegel's use of what Benjamin coins a 'mystical terminology', which satisfies at once the idea that knowledge is a fundamentally inward-looking operation and the exigency of systematicity.[97] As Benjamin explains, Schlegel

> […] searches for a noneidetic intuition of the system, and he finds this in language. Terminology is the sphere in which his thought moves beyond discursivity and demonstrability. For the term, the concept, contained for him the seed of the system; it was, at bottom, nothing other than a preformed system itself. Schlegel's thinking is *absolutely conceptual* – that is, it is linguistic thinking.[98]

[93] *CC*, p. 168.
[94] *CC*, p. 126.
[95] *CC*, p. 126. Benjamin's argument here is ambivalent, for it exposes the Romantics' theory through the lens of the 'Hilfskonstruktion' he designed while showing that the latter is inaccurate. Hence, the notion of the dissolution of the particular form of reflection in the Absolute transforms the multiplicity of reflections into the simple binary of 'maximum' and 'minimum' reality content. With his *Hilfskonstruktion*, Benjamin makes it possible to criticize the Romantics' privileging of the standpoint of the Absolute. (*CC*, p. 130.)
[96] *CC*, p. 135.
[97] *CC*, p. 139.
[98] *CC*, p. 140.

This mystical terminology enables Schlegel to 'call the system by its name',[99] which is not to 'grasp the absolute systematically' but to seize 'the system absolutely'.[100] The concentration of intuition in the linguistic fragment immediately points to Leibniz's philosophy. The Romantics articulated the functioning of such mystical terminology in their theory of the *Witz* (wit). For the Romantics, Leibniz was the 'virtuoso' of this 'fragmentary geniality.'[101] For them, the genius of Leibniz lay in his instinctive merging of science, theology and philosophy in a 'witzig' 'logical chemic'. [102] According to Benjamin, the idea that the individual concept can concentrate an 'ensemble of systematic interconnections' [103] *presupposes* 'a continuous, medial context, of a reflective medium of concepts,' a medium that 'makes its appearance in the witty observation, as it does in the mystical term, like a flash of lightning.'[104] This medial context is no other than the medium of language with its 'secret bonds of association.' [105] In this sense, it is literary writing, with its non-linear, interior connexions that provides philosophy with its model of coherence. Aligning the theory of criticism with literature, Benjamin thinks a form of determination that would be modelled upon the literary form; he is in search of a 'medium' that would be at once the space of knowledge and the space of prosaic language. [106] As Wohlfarth observes, Benjamin's remarks on the systematic orientation of the Romantics can be fruitfully applied to his own form of philosophizing: proceeding by rejecting the system, it produces a 'mystical terminology that is half-way between the name and the concept.'[107]

Undermining what Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have coined as the 'system-subject' laying at the heart of speculative idealism,[108] Benjamin sought to establish reflection from a metaphysical 'point of indifference.' By retranslating the Early Romantic theory of Art Criticism from the sphere of the absolute 'Art' to that of language, Benjamin

[99] *CC*, p. 140.
[100] *CC*, p. 138.
[101] *CC*, p. 141.
[102] *Athenaum*, fragments 220 and 358, in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'Absolu Littéraire. Théorie de La Littérature Du Romantisme Allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), p.128-9 & 155.
[103] *CC*, p. 140.
[104] *CC*, p. 140. Translation modified.
[105] *CC*, p. 141.
[106] Phelan, 'Fortgang and Zusammenhang', p. 69.
[107] Wohlfarth, 'Le "Médium" de L'histoire', p. 104. Translation mine.
[108]Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *L'Absolu Littéraire*, p. 49.

would fact reactivated the latent Leibnizianism contained in their thought. He systematically highlighted the aspects which, in Romanticism, were attached to Leibniz, without acknowledging that such a link existed. Rather, Benjamin proposed to view the Monadology as a contrasting paradigm to that of the Romantics.

> [For the Romantics,] reality does not form an aggregate of monads locked up in themselves and unable to enter into any real relations with one another. On the contrary, all unities in reality, except for the absolute itself, are only relative unities. They are so far from being shut up in themselves and free of relations that through the intensification of their reflection (potentiation, romanticization) they can incorporate other beings, other centers of reflection, more and more into their own self-knowledge.[109]

At the time, it is probable that Benjamin only had a superficial acquaintance with Leibniz's philosophy.[110] To think of monads as 'free of relations' manifests Benjamin's limited knowledge of Leibniz, for the structure of reflection described here is *precisely* monadological: the 'outside' of the artwork's form is 'intensively' reflected 'inside' it, 'incorporated' as knowledge. As the next chapter will substantiate, in stressing the immanent character of the absolute as 'self-enclosed totality,'[111] the monad encapsulates the very dialectic of the continuous and the discontinuous, the relational and a-relational, the systematic and the singular. As such, Benjamin's recourse to the concept of monad needs to be interpreted as the very possibility of *going beyond* the limitations of both the Romantic and Goethean ontologies of art.

Finally, it is important to recognize how Benjamin's medium is implicated in the recasting of the Romantic absolute into a space of determinability. As such, the medium can be understood as part of Benjamin's systematic attempt to disentangle criticism from any form of subjective 'judgement', by thinking the work as an objective structure of determinability, encapsulated in the suffix '-barkeit' (-ability) throughout Benjamin's writings.[112] As the construction of the *Reflexionmedium* shows, it is less the unpredictability of the process that is at stake in these possibilities than a *specific*

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[109] *CC*, p. 146.

[110] As Paula Schwebel indicates, 'Leibniz may have been in the atmosphere of German philosophy departments during Benjamin's student years, but there is no record that he ever attended a course on Leibniz, or even on early modern philosophy.' 'Walter Benjamin's Monadology,' *Doctoral thesis* (University of Toronto, 2012), p. 16.

[111] Ibid, pp.156-7.

[112] Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 7.

relationality involved in transforming these concepts into the form of the determinable.[113] According to Samuel Weber, the '-abilities' 'virtualize the process of nominalization' in a way that renders these names inseparable from 'an ongoing, ever-unfinished, and unpredictable process'. It is a virtual rearrangement of the concept, Weber claims, which 'decomposes' or even 'deconstructs' 'the pre-existing empirical organisation of the phenomena'.[114] What Weber's deconstructive reading of the '-abilities' is stressing is therefore their un-determinate and unpredictable character, rather than their determinate or 'terminable' horizon. Benjamin's '-abilities' would be possibilities of incalculable *alterations*. Such an interpretation, however, obscures the problem of actualization and the articulateness of these determinabilities.[115] Benjamin's construction of Romantic reflection instead shows that he sought to formulate criticizability and translatability in the 'space' of a thoroughgoing *Zusammenhang*, or nexus of determinations.

[113] Such a concern was already evident in 'Two Poems by Friedrich Hölderlin' (*SW1*, pp. 18-36) in which Benjamin sought to ground criticism in the 'poetized'. Rather than explaining the poem through the 'individual life-mood of the artist', the poetized defines a more determinate 'life-context' (*Lebenszusammenhang*) through art. (p. 20). It thus lies between the realm of essence (metaphysics) and the realm of experience (as life) in a *medial* position by opposition to the logical anteriority assumed by the Kantian transcendental. 'Evidently', continues Benjamin, 'it is not elements but relations that are at stake, since the poetized itself is, after all, a sphere of relation between the work of art and life, whose unities themselves are wholly ungraspable.' (p. 20) For the young Benjamin, the work of art can be analysable as a determinate structure of experience, which is contingent in relation to the domain of 'life' but necessary in relation to art criticism. 'Thus, the poetized emerges as the transition from the functional unit of life to that of the poem. In the poetized, life determines itself through the poem, the task through the solution. The underlying basis is not the individual life-mood of the artist but rather a determinate life-context (*Lebenszusammenhang*) through art.' pp. 19-20. Translation modified.

[114] Weber, *Benjamin's –abilities*, p. 7.

[115] As Khatib remarks, reducing them to the Aristotelian opposition of potentiality and actuality overlooks Benjamin's own metaphysics and epistemology of *actualisation* as an increase of reality content. 'An -ability is thereby not merely the potency (possibility) of an actuality, but the driving-beyond-itself of a specific actuality, which always contains more reality, than this level of actuality can produce.' Sami R. Khatib, *Teleologie ohne Endzweck* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2014), p. 96. Translation mine.

2. Relationality

Life and History: The Task of the Translator II

Written shortly after his dissertation, 'The Task of the Translator' operates a series of decisive theoretical transitions towards Benjamin's own theory of criticism. Benjamin follows the Romantics in associating translation with criticism, and in conceptualising translation as a refractive operation upon a form. However, he holds in check the infinite play of intensification of Romantic reflection by thinking each translation as 'definitive'. The process of translation is not transitive; it breaks the work. Whilst the Romantics' conception of the critical 'universalization' of artworks remained indexed to their absolutization, Benjamin articulates the historicity of artworks through a specification of their singular and determinate becoming, which he encapsulates through the concept of 'life' and 'afterlife'. Having established this, Benjamin makes further clarifications. Firstly, the concepts of life and afterlife are not metaphorical but *objective* determinations, and secondly, the correct standpoint to approach them is not nature but *history*:

> The idea of life and continued life [*Fortleben*] in works of art should be regarded with an entirely unmetaphorical objectivity. […] The concept of life is given its due only if everything that has history and is not merely the stage of history, is credited with life. In the final analysis, it is from the standpoint of history and not from that of nature, least of all by such tenuous factors as sensation and soul, that the sphere of life must be determined. The philosopher's task consists in comprehending all of natural life through the more encompassing life of history. And indeed, isn't the continued life of works of art far easier to recognize than that of living creatures? The history of the great works of art tells us about their descent from prior models, their realization in the age of the artist, and what in principle should be their eternal living-on [*Fortleben*] in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. Translations that are more than communication of subject matter come into being when a work, in the course of its continued life, has reached the age of its fame.[116]

In this passage, life and history are both differentiated and defined by means of one another. The concept of 'life' comprises everything 'whereof there is history' (*wovon es Geschichte gibt),* everything historical in the sense of an immanent or interior history.

[116] *TT*, p. 255. Translation modified.

Those endowed with life are not mere 'objects' displayed on history's stage, but entities that history inhabits or animates. At the same time, these entities are not merely self-contained historical units, they also belong, Benjamin indicates, to a more 'encompassing' sphere: the life of history. Between the multiplicity of 'historical lives' (artworks) and the 'life of history' in the collective singular, the relationship is perspectival: each can only be determined *from the vantage point* of the other.[117] Mediating between particular artworks and the history of languages, translation provides an especially strong illustration of a form of historicity that does not subsume art under 'empirical' history yet relates to the history of languages through expression.[118] Indeed, Benjamin takes translation as an exemplary case of the way art forms relate to history *internally*, through the life of their expressive form. The survival of the work occurs 'after' the work's first life, when it is remote from its creation. Only by detaching itself from its author and after its first 'death' can the work access full autonomy.[119]

Benjamin's notion of survival or living-on (*Fortleben*) is characterized by a paradoxical historicity. As Berman observes, if translations occur 'later' than their originals, it is not simply because they come after them, but because they arise at the moment of their 'ripening', *i.e.* their 'fame'. There is a 'right time' (*rechtzeitig*), a *kairos* for translation, something that clearly appears in the following quotation from *One-Way Street*:

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[117] As Adorno would put it, the opposition between nature and history is primarily dialectical. '[…] wherever I operate with the concepts of nature and history, no ultimate definitions are meant, rather I am pursuing the intention of pushing these concepts to a point where they are mediated in their apparent difference.' Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural History', in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance*: *On Theodor Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 252-3.

[118] This appears with greater clarity in Benjamin's 1923 letter to his friend Florens Christian Rang, which is contemporaneous with the publication of the *Tableaux Parisiens*. In this letter, Benjamin summarized his previous undertakings, shedding a retrospective light on 'the Task of the Translator' as well as connecting it to the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'. 'I have been reflecting on the way in which works of art relate to historical life. In so doing, I proceed from the conviction that there is no such thing as art history.' (Letter to Florens Christian Rang,' *SW1,* 388) Unlike in human life, artworks 'possess nothing that links them extensively and essentially; they have nothing comparable to the hereditary relationships between successive generations […] [t]he essential links between works of art remain intensive. In this respect, works of art resemble philosophical systems. […] For the process of interpretation brings to light connexions between works of art that are timeless, yet not without a historical dimension. The same forces that become explosively and extensively temporal in the revealed world (that is, history) emerge intensively in the taciturn world (that is, the world of nature and art).' pp. 388-9.

[119] Antoine Berman, Isabelle Berman, and Valentina Sommella, *L'Age de la traduction : La tâche du traducteur* (Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires Vincennes, 2008), p. 80.

'Commentary and translation stand in the same relation to the text as style and mimesis to nature: the same phenomenon considered from different viewpoints. On the tree of the sacred text, both are only the eternally rustling leaves; on that of the profane, the timely (*rechtzeitig*) falling fruits.'[120] If translatability is essential to certain works only -those which have the inner capacity to renew themselves 'eternally' [121]- it also virtually possesses the conditions of its own survival from the beginning, in a quasi-preestablished manner.

At the same time, the 'continued life' of works also designates the transience of forms in the empirical world, the re-appropriations of models inherited from the past and their transformation through time. As Benjamin notes, translation is deeply embedded in the transformative process that both artworks and languages undergo through time. 'For just as the tone and the meaning of the great works of literature completely transform themselves over the centuries (*wandeln*), the mother tongue of the translator is transformed as well.'[122] Benjamin configures translation as the complex point of contact between two perpetually transforming entities (two languages) through the mediation of a, third, the form, the meaning of which also changes through time. 'For in its living-on (*Fortleben*) – which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living – the original changes.'[123] In this incessant change and movement of languages, translation cannot be defined through resemblance. Indeed, by establishing a relation between two historical forms and two historical idioms, a translation can only be a given perspective on the past from a specific 'present'. Expressing the artwork under a determinate perspective, translation represents the latter from the point of view of a specific moment of the history of languages.[124]

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[120] Walter Benjamin, 'One Way Street', *SW1*, p. 449. Translation modified.
[121] Berman et al., *L'Age de la traduction,* p. 79.
[122] *TT*, p. 256. Translation modified.
[123] Ibid. Translation modified.
[124] This idea resurfaces in *The Origin of German Trauerspiel* (1928), in which Benjamin would write: 'And just as every linguistic form, even unusual or isolated, can be seen not only as a testimony of what has shaped [*prägte*] it, but also as a document of the life of language and its possibilities at the time – so too does any artform – even more authentically than in each particular work – contain the index of a precise, objectively necessary figuration (*Gestaltung*) of art.' Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* [hereafter: *OT*], John Osborne (transl.), (New York and London: Verso, 2009), p. 49. Translation modified.

Tied up with the historicity of languages, translation becomes part of the movement of the renewal of idioms. By representing a literary work in what is not its language of creation, translation modifies this language: 'Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.'[125] The quotation from Pannwitz enounces this in an especially limpid way towards the end of the prologue:

> The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.[126]

Such transformation takes place in the thickness of language, through the decomposition and recomposition of units of expression, which 'affect' the target language with new expressive configurations. Alongside this *enlargement* of expressivity, which brings us back to the *locus classicus* of the German *Bildung*, translation is attributed the quasi or 'weak' messianic role of bringing revelation closer.[127] Thus, translation is endowed with a double transformative function: in transforming idioms, translation secretly releases the messianic temporality inherent to them. Partaking in the unpredictable movement of languages, translations also anticipate, and predict, the end of times.

With the task of bringing the ripening process of artworks into sync with the transformation of idioms, translation is essentially determined by what Benjamin describes as the 'movement of language' (*Sprachbewegung*). Humboldt, whose works Benjamin had studied at university in 1915,[128] likewise defined language as a fundamentally transitory entity ('*etwas Vorübergehendes*'), moving and mobile. As

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[125] *TT*, p. 256.
[126] *TT*, p. 262.
[127] This implies that, although Benjamin reproduces the theory of linguistic '*Erweiterung*' and thus aligns himself with the German tradition of translation theory, he replaces the national framework (and telos) of the latter with a theological one.
[128] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. The Story of a Friendship*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 22.

Humboldt writes, languages are living textures (*'Gewebe'*), [129] a 'series of points conditioned by precedent points' in which we are always 'placed in the middle'.[130] For Humboldt, translation is a factor of linguistic renewal; it 'enlarges the expressive capacity of the language.'[131] In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin simply restates: 'Luther, Voss, Hölderlin, and George have enlarged the frontiers of German language (*haben die Grenzen des Deutschen erweitert*).[132] In a later note dated 1925, however, Benjamin would disapprove of Humboldt's approach toward language exclusively 'as part of objective spirit (in Hegel's sense)' and of his overlooking of the poetic, 'magical' side of language.[133] According to Benjamin, the historicity of languages cannot be fully grasped through a science of the objective spirit, neither in a Hegelian, nor in a Saussurian sense, because language refers to an *anthropological* capacity. Next to the biblical narrative that frames his earliest inquiry into language, Benjamin consistently posed the problem of the genesis of language in relation to psychology and anthropology. As such, some of his reflections echo the scientific findings of his contemporaries, which, as the modern discipline of linguistics was constructing itself, demonstrated the productivity of a transdisciplinary approach to language. As Benjamin would write in an article for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung,* [134] the sociology of language is a 'border-area':[135] Benjamin's interest in language always involved 'more' than language, extending it to the 'expressive' in its broadest and most intractable dimension. To a certain extent, Benjamin's philosophy sought to stretch language until it would completely overlap with aesthetics in its etymological sense as a science of senses.[136]

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[129] See: Eliane Escoubas, 'La Bildung et Le "Sens de La Langue": Wilhem von Humboldt', *Littérature*, 86 (1992), pp. 57-9.

[130] Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Ueber den Nationalcharakter des Sprachen, Buchstück', *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann, vol. 4 (Berlin: Behr, 1903-1936), p. 424; *Sur le caractère national des langues et autres écrits sur le langage*, trans. Denis Thouard (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), p.139.

[131] Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Einleitung zu Agamemnon', *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. A. Leitzmann, (Berlin: Behr, 1903-1936), vol. 8, p. 131; *Sur le caractère national des langues et autres écrits sur le langage*, trans. Denis Thouard (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2000), p.37.

[132] *TT*, p. 261.

[133] Walter Benjamin, 'Reflections on Humboldt', *SW1*, p. 424.

[134] Walter Benjamin, 'Problems in the Sociology of Language' [1935], *SW3*, pp. 68-86.

[135] Ibid., p. 68.

[136] Cassin et al. highlight the variety of meanings encapsulated by the Greek aisthanomai, which includes to perceive, to understand, to realize. See: Barbara Cassin and al., 'Sense/Meaning' in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 949.

Intensive Languages

In 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy', Benjamin argued that the future epistemology could only be brought about through a 'higher concept of experience' and on the basis of a 'future metaphysics.'[137] This transformation concerned not only metaphysics but the concept of knowledge itself, in so far as the latter is already constituted upon an implicit, 'rudimentary' metaphysics, that of a certain relation between subject and object.[138] It is in this context that he first introduced what would later be developed under the heading of 'nonsensuous similarity' and the 'mimetic faculty', invoking the perceptual experience of 'primitive', 'insane' and 'sick' people as an example of a perception as identification rather than perception of 'objecta "placed before" them.'[139] The 'coming philosophy' would require a redefinition of the concept of knowledge, not by reference to science, but to language, as Hamann proposed.[140] In opposition to the 'fragmentation of experience into the realms of the individual sciences', Benjamin sought to ground knowledge in the 'concrete, totality of experience', that is, in 'existence.'[141] This indicates that, from an early stage, Benjamin sought to establish this 'higher concept of experience' in the realm of perception as a non-intentional, non-objectifying 'relation' to the world, of which model was to be found in a non-intentional, 'intensive' form of language.

At the same time, Benjamin attempted to ground the philosophy of language on a form of 'similarity' that would not be 'analogical': a similarity that would not depend on 'resemblance'. The 1919 fragment titled 'Analogy and Relationship' offers a preliminary sketch of what would become, more than a decade later, 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933). In the 1919 text, Benjamin contrasts the 'enigmatic' nature of the relationship of affinity (*Verwandtschaft*) with the 'scientific, rational principle' of analogy,[142] which designates a 'similarity of relations'. 'Only substances can be similar (*ähnlich*) in a real (nonmetaphorical) sense.'[143] Dissociating similarity from formal resemblance depends on thinking similarity as a special relation of proximity or

[137] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Programme of the Coming Philosophy', *SW1*, p. 102.
[138] Ibid., p. 102.
[139] Ibid., p. 103.
[140] Ibid., p. 108.
[141] Ibid., p. 110.
[142] Walter Benjamin, 'Analogy and Relationship', *SW1*, p. 208.
[143] Ibid., p. 207.

convergence, *i.e.* a 'nonsensuous similarity' (*unsinnlichen Ähnlichkeit*). In 'Doctrine of the Similar', Benjamin would define language as the main or canonical form of 'nonsensuous similarity'. The perception of 'natural correspondences' is associated not only with phases in the development of children but also with 'archaic' practices such as the astrology of 'primitive people'.[144] Benjamin is interested in the remnants and transformation of such mimetic faculty in language and writing, which constitutes 'the most perfect archive of nonsensuous similarity' and the 'highest application of the mimetic faculty'.[145] It is crucial to note that in so far as they belong to the order of the perceptual, similarity and correspondences are necessarily transient, 'bound to a moment in time'.[146] Designating the connexion of man to the world, the formulation of nonsensuous similarity is to be related to Benjamin's early project to revolutionize epistemology through another concept of experience. The latter, Scholem summarizes, 'would encompass man's intellectual and psychological connection to the world, which takes place in the realms not yet penetrated by cognition.'[147] The critique of resemblance is therefore an integral part of Benjamin's 'metacritique' of reason, joining together, rather than opposing, language and experience. In showing that language originates in the experience of similarity, and, inversely, that the experience of similarity can be grasped as an immediate participation to the 'language of things', Benjamin proposes to found epistemology in language *and* experience as a mutual system of priorities.

For Benjamin, the temporality of language is double, historical and messianic; in turn, translation acquires a double role. It has not only a transformational role in relation to national languages as historical realities, but also a messianic one: to reveal the *truth* of language, or 'pure language'. The task of the translator knots these two dimensions together, since it is *by* striving 'to liberate the language imprisoned in a work' that the translator 'breaks through decayed barriers of his own language'.[148] Although the Romantics can be credited for having recognized the 'life of literary works',[149] by focusing almost exclusively on criticism they overlooked translation and the messianic

[144] Walter Benjamin, 'Doctrine of the Similar', *SW2*, p. 695.
[145] Ibid., p. 697.
[146] Ibid., p. 696.
[147] Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin. The Story of a Friendship*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), p. 59.
[148] *TT*, 261.
[149] *TT*, p. 258.

dimension proper to language. In refracting an artwork in the medium of a language, translation reveals a second level of expression, that of the 'innermost relationship of languages to one another' (*des innersten Verhältnisses der Sprachen zueinander*).[150] These relationships are neither historical connexions nor relations of resemblance: they depend on the semiotic function of language. As Benjamin argues, there exists a supra-historical kinship (*Verwandtschaft*) between all languages, insofar as taken in their integrality, they all *intend* the same thing.[151] Like a multiplicity of vectors pointing towards a single centre, the various ways of meaning the same thing exclude one another while 'supplementing one another in their intentions'.[152] In the temporary equilibrium produced by translation, the provisional 'coming to terms with the foreignness of languages', a higher language emerges, that is, pure language. The aim of 'integrating many tongues into one true language'[153] characterizes the task of the translator in its specificity, and explains its 'higher' status: translation is fundamentally oriented towards a truth that lies buried in languages.

> [Translation] cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. This representing of something signified through an attempt at establishing it in embryo is of so singular nature that it is rarely met with in the sphere of nonlinguistic life. In its analogies and signs, the latter can draw on other ways of suggesting meaning than this *intensive* – that is, *anticipative, allusive – realization*. As for the posited innermost relationship of languages, it is marked by a peculiar convergence. This special kinship holds because languages are not strangers to one another, but are, a priori and apart from all historical relationships, interrelated in what they want to express.[154]

It would be incorrect to think of pure language as 'purified' language, either in the sense of the 'originary' language or in the sense of an abstract universal. Pure language is what is meant by the intensive totality of all languages, it is to be associated with a

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[150] *TT*, p. 255.

[151] *TT*, p. 257.

[152] Benjamin comes back to this image in his 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty' (1933): 'For if words meaning the same thing in different languages are arranged about that signified as their center, we have to inquire how they all – while often possessing not the slightest similarity to one another –are similar to the signified at their center. Such an understanding is of course related in the most intimate way to mystical or theological theories of language, without, however, being alien to empirical philology.' ('Doctrine of the Similar', *SW2*, p. 696)

[153] *TT*, p. 259. In On 'Language as Such', Benjamin had already developed this second-order semiotic at the level of language as a whole, associating the 'intensive totality of language' with the 'absolutely communicable spiritual entity, and the extensive totality of language, as the universally communicating (naming) entity.' (*LS* pp. 65-6)

[154] *TT*, p. 255; *GS4*, p. 12. Translation modified; emphasis added.

harmonic or musical idea of totalization, an idea Benjamin already developed through the notion of *media*, which, as textural *densities*, are not mutually exclusive. As Matthew Charles puts it, '[t]o put one language in the same place or on top of another implies an optical depth, according to which both are visible at the same moment.'[155] Likewise, the example of the 'interlinear version' of the Bible which, introduced at the very end of the preface, retrospectively structures the entire argument by providing its true 'destination,' figures as a perfect model of inter-mediality. As Benjamin would write again in 1936, this form of translation 'acknowledges its own role' by thematizing the 'difference of linguistic situations'.[156]

Furthermore, the relationship between 'intensive language' and anticipation may be interpreted in light of the *infinitesimal*. Kant's notion of the 'anticipations of perception' significantly lay at the crux of Cohen's critique of Kant and as a focal point of his works on Leibniz. Through the problem of the anticipations of perception, Cohen claimed, the Leibnizian infinitesimal had become a central aspect of the 'production' of reality.[157] If perception can be anticipated, it is not, Cohen highlights, because the real is constituted *of* the infinitesimal (that would undermine Kant's claim to ground the possibility of objects *a priori*) but because perception has the capacity to apprehend in an infinitesimal *way*. Therefore, the intensive infinity of the infinitesimal can ground a

[155] *TT*, p. 75.

[156] 'La Traduction –le pour et le contre', a 1936 dialogue probably written together with Günther Anders as a sketch for a radio script to be broadcasted on the French radio. *SW3*, p. 250.

[157] Cohen's exegesis crucially hinged upon the role played by the infinitesimal calculus within Kantian epistemology as 'critical knowledge of nature' (Hermann Cohen, *Le principe de la méthode infinitésimale et son histoire* (Paris : Vrin, 1999), p. 48) At stake in Cohen's reading of Kant is the principle of the transcendental possibility of mathematics, which is closely related to the principles of intuition. This principle has two sources: extensive and intensive magnitude. As Cohen explains, to affirm that 'all phenomena are extensive magnitudes', which is the axiom of intuition, does not suffice to ground possible objects. Indeed, the principle of magnitude does not per se suffice to ground possible objects as 'extensive magnitude', which remains homogeneous and comparative in kind. To *be* an object it needs another fundament and thus risks infinite regress. This is, for Cohen, what motivates Kant to introduce the notion of intensive magnitude and the section on the 'anticipations of perception'. The latter, for Cohen, can be called 'principle of reality,' in so far as 'it is the realization of the real by means of intensive magnitude'. Through the principle of continuity, 'the limitative reality is schematized in the continuity of time'. However, crucially, in his use of the infinitesimal, Kant has grounded reality in sensation itself, thus 'missing the transcendental centre of the principle'. Instead of founding the object Kant produces it. But the law of continuity is only a mathematical *figuration*, not a *foundation*. The confusion stems from the idea, emerging from Leibniz, that the differential is an *objective content*, a confusion that is connected to the role that the infinitesimal historically played in the passage from mathematics to physics. Yet, Cohen critically underscores, an intensive magnitude is 'nothing else than a differential magnitude/quantity'. Hermann Cohen, *Kants Theorie der Erfahrung* (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler, 1871) pp. 544-547; *La théorie kantienne de l'expérience* (Paris: Cerf, 2001) 432-435.

notion of fulfilment that is not predicated upon progressive completion where each previous step is dissolved into that which follows, but which, we may say, preserves difference. The important point is not the repetition of the differential as a mathematical interval, but the possibility of thinking fullness through continuity, through 'anticipation' rather than through saturation (as the Schlegelian absolute).

An early fragment titled 'Language and Logic', which probably constituted a preparatory note for the translation preface, indicates that Benjamin was seeking to ground the passage from the prelapsarian language to the multiplicity of language (*Vielheit der Sprachen*) through an idea distinct from that of the dissolution of an original unity. He notes that '[…] the multiplicity of languages is not the product of decadence any more than is the multiplicity of people, and indeed is so far removed from any such decay that we might be justified in asserting that this multiplicity expresses their essential character.' [158] Developing a logical scheme capable of underlying such a model of language, Benjamin opposes the relation between concepts to the relation between essences. Whilst the *concept* relates to 'lower concepts' through a scheme of subsumption whereby 'what is known loses its autonomy for the sake of what it is known as',[159] the essence 'rules' over other essences by remaining at a distance, thus preserving their autonomy. Benjamin notes that '[…] [e]very essence possesses from the outset a limited – and moreover determinate – multiplicity of essences, which do not derive from the unity in a deductive sense but are empirically assigned to it as the condition of its representation and articulation.'[160] Following the Goethean notion of 'ideal', the essence of language is here described as a discontinuous and determinate plurality; it is a certain linguistic power (*Gewalt*), which overpowers all individual languages in a harmonic or musical way.[161] If we follow through this line of reasoning, Benjamin claims that natural languages do not *derive* from an *Urprache* but constitute its 'condition of representation and articulation,' confer it its power in a

[158] Walter Benjamin, 'Language and Logic', *SW1*, p. 273; Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhauser (eds.), (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1972-1989), vol. 6 [hereafter *GS6*], p. 24.
[159] Ibid., p. 273.
[160] Ibid., p. 273.
[161] Ibid., p. 272.

'system of multiple essences'.[162] In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin claims that it is *literalness* that best reveals, in the practice of translation, this harmonic totalization:

> Of necessity, therefore, the demand for literalness, whose justification is obvious but whose ground is deeply hidden, must be understood in a more cogent context. Fragments of a vessel that are to be glued together *must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another*. In the same way a translation, instead of imitating the sense of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original's way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.[163]

Languages are not related through their resemblance but through their belonging to a greater language, which justifies their fundamental kinship (*Verwandtschaft*). Likewise, a translation does not resemble its original but instead places itself in the axis of its way of meaning, adopting its perspective. In this excerpt, Benjamin intertwines the theological image of the broken vessel with the mosaic character of language: the multiplicity of Babelian tongues is to pure language like the multiplicity of linguistic details are to the text: in both cases, what connects them is a certain *affinity.* Just as in a translation words must match one another without resembling one another, languages converges at a point 'at infinity' where their lines intersect. Here, projective geometry proves the best means to think analogy, affinity or kinship without resemblance, (*Verwandtschaft* without *Ähnlichkeit)* and thus to grasp the logic proper to expression. In its relation to the details of text, (words), a translation must find the key to this analogy, not in the 'reproduction of sense'[164] at the level of the sentence, but in a certain passage that literalness opens up. This excerpt clearly illustrates the way in which Benjamin's problematic of translation is detached from a national conception of language as *Bildung*. In Benjamin's conception, languages are not defined through the linguistic communities which speak them but by reference to a larger unity that encompasses them all. The theological narrative does not exhaust this logic of linguistic plurality: its rationale is just as importantly a semiotic or expressive regime.

As Marc De Launay has pointed out, translation draws an ascendant path towards the restoration of pure language which appears exactly inverse to that of the Fall and may

[162] Ibid., p. 273.
[163] *TT*, p. 260. Emphasis mine, translation modified.
[164] *TT*, p. 260.

thus seem indebted to Benjamin's earliest theological intuitions on language.[165] However, the perspective undertaken in 'The Task of the Translator' is decisively different from the one commanding 'On Language as Such'. 'Pure language' is no longer conceptualised as originary language, but as the virtual totality of languages, their 'intensive' completion. Whereas in this earlier essay, Benjamin had presented pure language ontologically as the spiritual being of language, as its essence, in 'The Task of the Translator', the latter reveals itself only *through the act of translation*, i.e. indirectly, by piercing through, either 'linguistic elements', or 'artworks'.[166] The determinant standpoint is not theology (revelation) anymore, but knowledge. Here, the 'language of truth' towards which languages strive *is* the 'true language' of philosophy.[167]

In light of the previous analysis, 'The Task of the Translator' proves to be part of Benjamin's broader metacritique of epistemology, at the confluence of his writings on language and his writings on epistemology. In both contexts, what is at issue is the establishment of a relational medium that radically transforms the notion of meaning: meaning does not relate word and thing, or mind and word, but languages amongst one another.[168] According to Hamacher, this amounts to positing translatability as the 'transcendental of languages', the movement of translation becoming the unique condition of possibility of languages. The 'law' of each language would be its very 'laying claim to' other languages in a primitively self-differentiating movement.[169] 'As the language of linguistic relations' Hamacher observes, 'translation attains to the degree of intensity of language as such, surpassing the individual languages but itself no longer surpassable.'[170]

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[165] Marc de Launay, 'Messianisme et philologie du langage,' *MLN* 127 (2012), p. 654.

[166] *TT*, p. 261.

[167] 'If there is such a thing as a language of truth, a tensionless and even silent depository of the ultimate secrets for which all thought strives, then this language of truth is – the true language. And this very language, in whose divination and description lies the only perfection for which a philosopher can hope, is intensively concealed in translations.' *TT*, p. 259. Translation modified.

[168] Andrew Benjamin, E., *Translation and the Nature of Philosophy: A New Theory of Words* (Routledge, 1989), p. 96.

[169] 'Translatability is the high law, the trans-law, so to speak, of language as such. (*Übersetzbarkeit is das Über-Gesetz, das, sit venia verbo, 'Übersetz' der Sprache überhaupt*). In this key principle of Benjamin's theory of language, however, law signifies both structure and demand, and translatability is thus the categorical imperative of language: the structural demand through which alone language is language, the language of the demand for another language, language's laying claim to another language.' Werner Hamacher, 'Intensive Languages', *MLN*, 127 (2012), p. 493.

[170] Ibid., p. 512.

Finally, a closer look at the multiple determinations of the term 'intensive' in Benjamin's writings may help us capture the various threads of Benjamin's early metaphysics of expression. In the first place, 'intensive' opposes itself to the extensive: intensive relations are qualitative as well as non-extended, *i.e* internal. In the second place, Benjamin sets 'intensive' in opposition with notions of 'intention' and 'intentionality' as the property of being 'about' an object, to relate a word or a state of mind either representatively or cognitively. In the third place, 'intensive' designates a state of intensity and can thus be associated with notions of nexus, connectedness, as well as fulfilment that pervade Benjamin's early works.[171] What these different determinations have in common is the notion of *interiority*: an intensive language or relation does not connect or express externally but internally. This relation is therefore, at the same time, non-relation. In 'The Task of the Translator', Benjamin indicates that the language of translation is intensive insofar as it realizes and anticipates the relationship between languages in an 'embryonic form'. By breaking the original intention of a text, translation reveals a pure or intensive language that is at once interior, essential and relational: a silent language. Translation, in other terms, constitutes a singular experiment on language, one that is at once poetic and metaphysical or religious. As Benjamin indicates, translation is located 'half-way between poetry and doctrine'.[172]

The previous analyses reveal that Benjamin's early philosophy is as much a philosophy of language, as a philosophy of *relations*. Benjamin's theology of language depends on a series of translations between the divine and the terrestrial. It starts with the emergence of a 'mute' nature through the creative Word, originating with this relation, whereby the word is *internally constitutive* of nature. 'To read what was never written' is for Benjamin the most ancient kind of reading.[173] This primary articulation of language and nature is none other that a scheme of 'pre-establishment', which structures all the other linguistico-metaphysical relations. Indeed, between every type

[171] In his essay on Hölderlin for instance, Benjamin had described the poem as an 'intensive interpenetration' of elements, as the unity of 'infinite functions'. He added 'No element can ever be singled out, void of relation, from the intensity of the world order, which is fundamentally felt.' 'Two Poems by Friedriech Hölderlin', *SW1*, p. 25.
[172] *TT*, p. 259.
[173] Walter Benjamin, 'On the Mimetic Faculty', in *SW2*, p. 722.

of language what is at stake is an *internal passage* or relation. The word is internalized in nature, which finds its particular expression in the Adamic name, and which is not expressive in the sense of 'signs' or human language. This 'language of truth' is concealed in translation as it is more generally concealed in nature. 'There is no truth about an object. Truth is only *in* it.'[174] How shall we open a secret without destroying it? Would it not disappear like the mystery hidden in the socks of *Berlin Childhood*? In another fragment dated 1923, Benjamin reframed the question of intensity in relation to observation, retranslating his metaphysics of expression into the problem of experience: 'the intensive observer finds that something leaps out at him from the object, enters into him, takes possession of him, and something different – namely, the nonintentional truth – speaks from out of the philosopher.' [175] Recasting the relationship between subject and object, Benjamin's early metaphysics of expression is a theory of 'non-intentional truth', i.e. a 'truth' that is at once established *relationally* and *interruptive* in kind. Importantly, the concept of 'intensive language' enables Benjamin to shift the horizon of epistemology from the domain of nature to that of history. Indeed, in the same 1923 fragment, Benjamin states: '[t]he language of the intentionless truth (that is to say, of the object itself) possesses authority. This authority of the mode of speaking is the yardstick of objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*). [...] this authority stands in opposition to the conventional concept of objectivity because its validity, that of the nonintentional truth, is historical – that is to say, anything but timeless; it is bound to a particular historical base and changes with history.' [176] This fragment marks the enigmatic passage, in Benjamin's works, from the 'medium' of language to the 'medium' of history. As the next chapter will show, the concept of expression will prove crucial to this transition.

[174] Walter Benjamin, 'On the topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy', *SW1*, p. 404.
[175] Ibid.
[176] 'This language of the intentionless truth (that is to say, of the object itself) possesses authority. This authority of the mode of speaking is the yardstick of objectivity (*Sachlichkeit*). [...] this authority stands in opposition to the conventional concept of objectivity because its validity, that of the nonintentional truth, is historical – that is to say, anything but timeless; it is bound to a particular historical base and changes with history. "Timelessness" must therefore be unmasked as an exponent of the bourgeois concept of truth. The authority we have described, then, contains within it a precise concept of time, since it comes and goes depending on the temporal constellation.' Walter Benjamin, 'On the Topic of Individual Disciplines and Philosophy', *SW1*, p. 405.

CHAPTER VI

In the Prism of Expression: Benjamin's Translational History

This chapter has two different and correlated aims. On the one hand, it accounts for the historicization of Benjamin's expressive structure; on the other, it traces the transformation of Benjamin's theory of translation into a 'materialist' theory of reception and historical experience. In order to do so, the chapter traces the mutations of Benjamin's expressive metaphysics after his 'encounter' with the Monadology. This brings us to the preparatory works he wrote for his habilitation thesis, which, written 1920-1921, demonstrate Benjamin's renewed interest in Leibniz's philosophy. Along with a 1923 letter to Florens Christian Rang, Benjamin's first positive and explicit references to Leibniz are to be found in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' of *Die Urprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels* (1928). From this point on, the *Monadology* started to figure as a fundamental reference point in Benjamin's philosophy. As Paula Schwebel observes, Benjamin's engagement with Leibniz's texts was probably as much indirect as direct, and his references to the latter remained mostly cryptic.[1] Hence, it is my contention that Benjamin did not so much appropriate the Monadology as *converged* with it. Firstly, as already indicated, Benjamin was crucially influenced by the Romantic conception of the fragment, itself derived, at least in part, from a monadological worldview. Secondly, Benjamin and Leibniz shared the problem of expression as a major concern: by underscoring the irreducible diversity of expressive relations, both philosophers expanded the concept of language beyond the bounds of

[1] In all probability, as Paula Schwebel indicates, Benjamin had read the *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686) (to which he refers in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue') as well as the *Monadology* (1714), given his repeated references to 'Leibniz's Monadology'. She argues that two main indirect sources must be taken into consideration: Hermann Cohen, as well as an article by his student Heinz Heimsoeth: 'Leibniz Weltanschauung als Ursprung seiner Gedankenwelt', *Kantstudien*, 1917. Paula Schwebel, 'Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and Its Sources', *MLN* 127 (2012), pp. 589–610.

communicational utilitarianism, and demonstrated the internal plurality of its concept.[2] As a result, Benjamin's integration of the Monadology into his own methodic apparatus was immediate. As with Serres' structuralist analysis, Benjamin integrated the *Monadology* into his own 'epistemo-critique,' not as a 'finished' doctrine of the subject, the soul or pre-established harmony, but in the multiplicity of its simultaneous determinations. A transdisciplinary structure, the Monadology operates as a translational pivot between various entities, namely, in this case: the idea, the artwork and the image. As we will see, what translates across these forms is not only a formal structure of relations but also the monad as space of perceptibility. Common to Benjamin's conception of truth as 'name' and his conception of historical *experience*, the monad retrospectively emerges as a fundamental theoretical bridge between Benjamin's (early) philosophy of language and his (late) materialist approach to history.[3] The last sections of this chapter will argue that the concepts of life and afterlife, as forms of historical expression, emerge as some of the fundamental reference points for Benjamin's conception of history.

1. Monad and Allegory in the *Trauerspiel*

Virtual History

Benjamin's Epistemo-Critical Prologue was meant to be a provocation to the academic establishment and to the 'arbitrariness of bourgeois science,'[4] of its language as well as its un-rigorous, theoretical synchretism. Against the 'self-absorbed fantasy' of 'present-age' theory of art,[5] Benjamin roots his study of the *Trauerspiel* strictly in a philosophical territory by reinvigorating Plato's theory of ideas. This way the prologue kills two birds

[2] However, it is important to note that whereas Leibniz modelled the plurality of expressive relations upon mathematics, Benjamin elaborated it inductively, principally through his study of art forms and through his interest for the anthropology of language.

[3] In his letter to Max Rychner dated 7 March 1931, Benjamin gave a famously enigmatic explanation of his move towards Marxism, justifying his inclination for materialistic thought through 'the basic metaphysical tendency' of his research. He further explains that 'there is a bridge to the way dialectical materialism looks at things from the perspective of my particular stance on the philosophy of language, however strained and problematical that bridge may be.' Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. by Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 372.

[4] See: Irving Wohlfarth, 'Hors-d'oeuvre', *Origine du drame baroque allemande*, trans. Sybille Muller (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), pp. 9-27.

[5] *OT*, p. 53.

with one stone: it founds the philosophy of artworks in ideas whilst also modelling the theory of the idea upon the artwork. This confrontation is anticipated in the epigraph of the book, which Benjamin borrows from Goethe.[6] The latter states that 'since art is always wholly presented in every particular work of art, so science ought to be wholly manifest in every particular object at hand.'[7] This principle of mutual inherence between the particular and the universal annuls the distinction between science and art: the universal is given at the same time as the particular. It is given, yet it is not yet *revealed* as such.[8] This revelation is the task of philosophy, which mainly resides in the art of presentation (*Darstellung*). As already determined in the dissertation, the task of the philosophy of art is to present the artwork as a totality, and by doing so to save it as a singularity.[9] However, and this is where Benjamin takes leave from the Greek debate, what produces the singularity of an artwork or an idea is not a unique and eternal definition, but *history*. Aided by philological 'research', philosophy must 'absorb' the history of the phenomenon until it reaches its most intimate structure (Struktur) and can thereby transfigure the phenomenon into an idea.

> […] In such investigations this historical perspective can be extended, into the past or the future, without being subject to any limit in principle. This gives the idea its totality (*das Totale*). And its structure (*Bau*) is a monadological one, imposed by totality in contrast to its own inalienable isolation. The idea is monad. The being that enters into it, with its fore- and after-history (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*), brings – concealed in its own form – an indistinct abbreviation of the rest of the world of ideas, just as, according to Leibniz's *Discourse on Metaphysics* (1686), every single monad contains, in an indistinct way, all the others.[10]

Philosophical history is a science of origins as 'emergences', emergences that deprive history of its 'pragmatic reality' and replaces it by a 'historico-natural' history.[11] As

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[6] Leibniz also had a decisive influence upon Goethe. As Dider Hurson indicates, Goethe himself recognized the influence of the latter upon some of his most fundamental ideas. See: Hurson, Didier, *Les mystères de Goethe: l'idée de totalité dans l'oeuvre de Johann Wolfgang von Goethe* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2003), pp. 49-51.

[7] *OT*, p. 27. Translation modified.

[8] This is clearly enunciated in another quotation by Goethe, which is introduced later in the book in the context of the definition of allegory. According to Benjamin, Goethe devised a 'negative afterconstruction of allegory' (*negative Nachkonstruktion der Allegorie*) (*GS1*, p. 338), in defining 'authentic poetry': 'Whoever grasps the particular in its vitality also grasps the general (*Allgemeine*), without being aware of it, or only becoming aware of it at a late stage.' *OT,* p. 161. This idea of belatedness evokes the confusion by which the totality is given in the monad's perceptions.

[9] *OT*, pp. 45-6.

[10] *OT*, p. 47; GS1, p. 228. Translation modified.

[11] *OT*, p. 47.

Benjamin acknowledges in a footnote,[12] 'The Task of the Translator' already established the notion of 'natural life' as the very name of this 'protected' and 'redeemed' historicity. However, whilst the essay on translation concerned itself with the historical becoming of the artwork, the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' is focused on ideas in the domain of the philosophy of art, themselves grounded in its historical manifestations. Whereas 'fame' constituted the eternal 'redemption' of the artwork, the idea is only a *temporary* redemption of phenomena, a fugitive 'emergence' or 'origin'. Moreover, what was previously accounted for as 'afterlife' is now polarized around the origin as fore- and afterhistory (*Vor- und Nachgeschichte*). The life of forms is transformed into a 'virtual content' whereby history is projected from the origin as its centre of perspective.

Benjamin claims that nineteenth century philosophical systems remained unconcerned with the problem of form: they sought to 'ensnare the truth' by weaving 'a spider's web between knowledges' (*Erkenntnissen*) 'as if [truth] came flying from the outside.'[13] To put it more prosaically, these systems confounded knowledge with truth. Whilst the *unity* of knowledge depends on the mediation of particular knowledges in a single nexus (*Zusammenhang*), the 'unity of truth is an unmediated (*unvermittelt*) and direct determination.'[14] 'The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence.'[15] Benjamin directly associates the philosophical task of presentation of ideas with the theory of Adamic nomination he had developed in his early philosophy of language: only the name can, without any phenomenality, have the power (*Gewalt*). 'The idea is something linguistic, and more precisely the *moment*, in the essence of the word, in which it is symbol.'[16] Whilst the philosopher's task is to present (*darstellen*) the idea by dispersing it in the concept, the idea represents (*repräsentiert*)[17] the phenomena virtually, or at a distance. In one movement, the philosopher presents the idea and saves the phenomena.[18]

[12] *OT*, note 14, pp. 237-8.
[13] *GS1*, p. 207.
[14] *GS1*, p. 210.
[15] *OT*, p. 36.
[16] *GS1*, p. 216. Emphasis added.
[17] *GS1*, p. 214.
[18] *OT*, p. 35.

As soon as Benjamin equates the idea with an origin, a basic notion of *historical legibility* has already emerged. Origins arise rhythmically: they depend on a certain temporal constellation, i.e. they are at once detached from pragmatic history and temporally determined. As he wrote to Rang, '[t]he specific historicity of works of art is […] one that can be unlocked only in interpretations, not in "art history." For the process of interpretation brings to light connections between works of art that are timeless, yet not without a historical dimension.'[19] Thinking truth as something linguistic, Benjamin distinguishes it from the 'system of knowledge'. He simultaneously defines truth as a non-relational being, and *indexes* it onto a temporal nexus, thus providing it with a new *nexus* of determination. The medium of truth thereby becomes a pure relational form of time. In a fragment dated 1920-1921 titled 'Theory of Knowledge', Benjamin noted that the 'constitution of things in the now of knowability' (*das Jetzt der Erkennbarkeit*)' and the 'limitation of knowledge in the symbol are the two tasks of the theory of knowledge'.[20] As he nominalizes 'jetzt' and thus gives the deictic the consistency of a noun, Benjamin introduces the Leibnizian notions of a 'perfected state of the world' and 'logical time':

> […] the world is knowable now. Truth resides in the 'now of knowability'. Only in this is there a (systematic, conceptual) *nexus* (A nexus between existing things and with the perfected state of the world). The now of knowability is logical time, which has to replace that of timeless validity.[21]

This excerpt appears to show the simultaneous phenomenological *isolation* and *temporal indexation* of truth are the direct outcomes of Benjamin's use of the Monadology as a metaphysical principle. If the Monadology constitutes 'the summa of a theory of ideas'[22] it is not only because the monad is a metaphysically discontinuous entity that is nevertheless phenomenally connected to the world through its internal, intensive infinity, but also because of the Monadology's singular temporal construction. Indeed, what drew Benjamin increasingly close to monadological metaphysics is the special connexion it establishes between the continuous and the discontinuous. This articulation was especially clear both with regards to mathematics and to time. Whilst Benjamin was aware of the infinitesimal calculus through his teacher Hermann Cohen,

[19] Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Florens Christian Rang', *SW1*, p. 388.
[20] 'Theory of Knowledge', *SW1*, p. 276; *GS6*, p. 46.
[21] Ibid.
[22] 'Letter to Florens Christian Rang', *SW1*, p. 389.

in his letter to Rang he explains his interest for Leibniz precisely because of the decisive importance of 'the discontinuity of whole numbers' for the theory of monads.[23] The intensive (i.e. continuous) nature of the petite perceptions internal to the monad, as opposed to their external discontinuity in relation to one another had the potential to produce a synthesis between the Idea and the Ideal.[24] This synthesis could, indeed, only take place as a certain non-synthesis, with the interruptive figure of the windowless monad that nevertheless mirrors the world as the best formulation. At the same time, Benjamin increasingly drew on the monad as a figure of temporal interruption over and against the continuity of the historical 'flow' of time. Leibniz famously introduces the notion of 'logical time', a time that is not a space or a stage but entirely dependent upon relations. The 'truth' encapsulated by the monad is established in relation to history and yet, as an interruption, and totalization of history, is placed in opposition to it.

The Neoplatonists thesis of 'universalia in re'[25] and the essentialization of ideas on which Benjamin relies constitute his paradoxical passage towards history. The crucial point to note is that these universals are not *given in* things in the manner of predicates (as definitions), but *constitute* them as their virtual history. The 'essence' or 'idea' thus depends on the historical depth of the 'phenomenon' at hand: its historical density, the potentially infinite unfolding of its investigation give the idea its total character (*das Totale*). Its capacity for totalization is the counterpart of its perspectival limitation. Indeed, such totality does not have the open character of the Romantic infinite (*Unendlichkeit*) or the Kantian Idea but is made of 'self-enclosed', 'intensive infinity'.[26] The dynamic of such an infinite is not a cosmic movement of expansion, but an inward move towards the micrological. In a monadological worldview, the real conceals its own interpretation in itself:

> And so the real world could well constitute a task, in the sense that it would be a question of penetrating so deeply into everything real as to reveal thereby an

[23] Ibid.

[24] I am refering here to the Appendix to Benjamin's dissertation, in which he contrasted the Romantics' Idea with Goethe's Ideal (*CC*, pp. 178-185).

[25] As Alain de Libera indicates, '[t]he latin scholastic theory of the three states of the universal, *ante rem*, *post rem* and *in re*, is the medieval continuation of the Neoplatonic theory of universals.' First formulated by Neoplatonists such as Ammonius, this solution to the problem of universals was part of their general project of harmonizing Aristotle and Plato's theories. Alain de Libera, *La querelle des universaux : De Platon à la fin du Moyen Age* (Paris: Seuil, 1998), pp. 105-109.

[26] 'Letter to Florens Christian Rang', *SW1*, p. 389.

> objective interpretation of the world. In the light of such a task of penetration it is not surprising that the philosopher of the *Monadology* was also the founder of infinitesimal calculus.[27]

The role of the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' is precisely to show how the idea of the *Trauerspiel* as genre can be reached through 'micrological' analyses of its language.[28] Like Russian dolls Benjamin's monadic images are imbricated into one another: the theory of ideas takes the *Trauerspiel* as its exemplary case, the *Trauerspiel* is unravelled through the theory of allegory, the allegory, through a theory of the word, which itself splinters into 'onomatopea', 'anagrams', 'syllables'. Baroque language, Benjamin writes, 'is constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up.'[29] The epistemo-critical theory of the monadic detail is thereby 'proven' in the course of the book, whilst also carrying its own 'antidote' at each level of analysis and opening onto a further 'abyss'. This micrology is as much a movement towards materiality as towards history. 'Structure and detail', Benjamin writes, 'are always historically charged'.[30] This historicization and materialization of language, which to a certain degree defines Benjamin's expressive metaphysics as a whole, reaches one of its most complete presentations in the theory of allegory.

Allegorical Expression

Benjamin's habilitation thesis bears numerous links to his 'On Language as Such' essay, a connexion that he acknowledged in his dedication. 'Conceived in 1916, composed in 1925', the *Trauerspiel* book transposes the theological question of the 'fall' of language into a baroque, Lutheran theory of allegory. In doing so, Benjamin revisits the philosophy of expression he had composed from Jewish and scholastic sources via the prism of Christian theological interpretation of the sign.[31] By constantly moving

[27] *OT*, p. 48.
[28] *GS6*, p. 208.
[29] *OT*, p. 207.
[30] *OT*, p. 182.
[31] What Irène Rosier designates as the thesis of 'universal symbolism' and which she grounds in Agustine is in some respects strikingly close to Benjamin's interpretation of allegorical language: 'What has been described as "universal symbolism" is grounded on this notion of *sign*. All created things must signify (*faire signe vers*) the creator, either directly, by pointing towards this ultimate signified, or indirectly: the sign refers to a *res* which can in its turn become sign, a sign that can again assume a function of *res* to refer to a new signified. This entails infinite possibilities of "semanticization" of the world, since each thing is always, in the Augustinian perspective, capable of transforming into a sign, under the condition – a condition

between the *Trauerspiel*'s languages and the philosophy of expression, Benjamin's theory of allegory turns out to be as much a theory of the *Trauerspiel* as a theory of *meaning* in the Baroque era. Benjamin situates the Baroque allegory within the historical context of Lutheranism, which he characterizes as an epoch of spiritual disorientation. The ruling out of 'good works' meant the disappearance of any guarantee of salvation.[32] In the *Trauerspiel* the whole of nature exhibits the stigmata of ineluctable historical decline (*Verfall*): unlike in tragedy, in the *Trauerspiel* it is not the individual situation, but the world itself that is penetrated by sadness; the world is a field of ruins.[33] In Benjamin's theory of the *Trauerspiel*, history *as* decline is a form of writing, a semiotic regime that characterizes nature as such. 'In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting'.[34]

Through his theory of allegory, Benjamin pursued his reflection on the metaphysics of expression. Allegory, writes Benjamin, 'is not a playful technique of imagistic figuration, but a form of expression, just like language or even writing.'[35] In allegory, convention and expression are no longer opposed (as they were in the theory of the name). Allegory is a conventional form of language that has let go of its 'communicational' function without any guarantee of attaining meaning. As such, it is the whole experience of the conventional and arbitrary character of meaning that is reflected into each linguistic unit. The allegorist attempts in vain to recover the language of nature: incapable of moving 'behind the image'[36] and of transfiguring the real, the realities represented are more and more naked and crude, testifying to an increasing devalorization of things. The important point, as Jacques-Olivier Bégot argues, lies in Benjamin's stress on the impossibility of removing the abyss (*Abgrund*) between imagistic being and signification.[37] The sign is indirect and opaque; it is hieroglyphic or *complicated* in a Leibnizian sense. This is because the subject of allegory *is* history itself.

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that is difficult to explicate – to be perceived as such. A thing is therefore not fixed and amorphous, it is entangled, by the dynamism of this process, in a relation or in multiple relations, to " something else", it mutates into a sign, but can as well retrogress into its state of thing.' Irène Rosier-Catach, *La parole efficace, Signe, rituel, sacré*, (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004), p. 484. Translation mine.

[32] *OT*, p. 138.

[33] *OT*, p. 139.

[34] *OT*, pp. 177-8.

[35] *GS1*, p. 339.

[36] *OT*, p. 185.

[37] Olivier Bégot, 'Sous le signe de l'allégorie. Benjamin aux sources de la théorie critique?', *Astérion [online]*, 7 (2010), <https://asterion.revues.org/1573>

Whilst the symbol fugitively reaches it meaning in an atemporal instant of truth, allegory is burdened with history, it is the result of the petrifying glance of death. In allegory, history is deprived of its processual character: it is self-enclosed, stifling. Mortification is not a projection into paradisiacal eternity but into the eternal return of nature.

In his programmatic text from 1916 'Trauerspiel and Tragedy', Benjamin had compared tragedy and mourning play with respect to their different relations to historical time.[38] He showed that the temporalizing role of death functions differently in each case. Whereas in tragedy, the tragic death is ironic and closes off the play within the 'magic circle' of the tragic hero's time, the temporal character of the *Trauerspiel* is an 'inherently nonunified drama, and the idea of its resolution no longer dwells within the realm of the drama itself.'[39] The form of the *Trauerspiel* is that of a 'play that repeats itself, in which iteration intensifies the sadness of nature and exhausts it.'[40] The play of language as infinite iteration, however, does not have the last word. 'For it is not the antithesis of history and nature but the total secularization of the historical in the original state of creation that has the last word in the baroque escape from the world [...] History wanders into the scene.'[41] In contrast to the intermittent chronological narrative of the tragedy, the *Trauerspiel* unfolds panoramically in the 'continuum of space'. What thus emerges in the mourning-play is the opposition between the secularized, quantitative time of terrestrial history and the fulfilled time of resurrection. [42] According to Benjamin, the empty interchangeability of earthly significations finds its equivalent in the infinitesimal method and the 'metaphysical tendency' of Leibniz's era:

> If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image. The image of the setting or, more precisely, of the court, becomes the key to historical understanding.[43]

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[38] Walter Benjamin, '*Trauerspiel* and Tragedy', *SW1*, p. 56.
[39] Ibid, p. 57.
[40] Antonia Birnbaum, *Bonheur Justice, Walter Benjamin : Le détour grec* (Paris: Payot, 2009), p. 38. Translation mine.
[41] *OT*, p. 92; *GS1*, pp. 270-1. Translation modified.
[42] *OT*, pp. 232-3.
[43] *OT*, p. 92.

According to Schwebel, 'Benjamin's analysis of the Baroque drama and his interpretation of Leibniz are mutually illuminating' as '[b]oth Leibniz's metaphysics and the Baroque *Trauerspiel* are engaged in the secularization of history'.[44] Benjamin interprets the secularization of history as the passage of history into the spatial image of terrestrial nature, and takes the infinitesimal method as its historico-scientific counterpart. [45] The possibility of the infinite's abridgement within the finite corresponds to a delimitation of the infinite, associated by Benjamin with the secularization of history on the historical stage (*Schauplatz*). Schwebel further argues that Benjamin interprets Leibniz as the advocate of a 'secular theology.'[46] Internalizing the infinite, Leibniz would thereby produce an 'inverted metaphysics', i.e. a metaphysics of infinite iteration.[47]

> Knowledge leads the instinct down into the empty abyss of evil in order to assure itself of infinity. But this is also the abyss of bottomless pensiveness. It is impossible to incorporate its details in philosophical constellations. And so they lie in the emblems-books of the baroque as the mere fund of a gloomy spectacle. More than any other form, the *Trauerspiel* works with this fund. It permutes its images with one another, tirelessly transforming, interpreting and deepening them. There, it is contradiction that rules above all.[48]

For Benjamin, baroque emblems have no intensive connexions with one another: they are only representative of the scattering of meaning in terrestrial existence. Captive of natural history, the semiotic entities of the *Trauerspiel* book are permanently recalling the possibility of their meaninglessness. Allegories, emblems, ruins, fragments are all forms of expression under threat, not only from losing their meaning, but also their very expressivity and thus turning back into the objects of a disenchanted nature. Whilst the Romantics conceived the fragment as a form dedicated to potentiation, the baroque fragment is expressive of the historical totality it is already part of. It does not lead to successive strata of meaning; the image is an 'amorphous fragment', which only suddenly and dialectically confronts the whole. The baroque allegorist 'piles up

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[44] Paula L. Schwebel, 'Walter Benjamin's Monadology', *Doctoral thesis* (University of Toronto, 2012), p. 4.

[45] If history is secularized in the setting, this is an expression of the same metaphysical tendency which simultaneously led, in the exact sciences, to the infinitesimal method. In both cases chronological movement is grasped and analysed in a spatial image.' *OT*, p. 92; *GS1* p. 271.

[46] Schwebel, 'Walter Benjamin's Monadology', p. 38.

[47] Paula Schwebel formulates this admirably: 'although reason is denied access to the transcendence of the heavens, in its pursuit of a fundamental grounding for contingent experience, thinking is drawn into an abyss of infinite analysis.' Schwebel, 'Intensive Infinity', p. 592.

[48] *OT*, p. 231; *GS1*, p. 404.

fragments, without any strict idea of goal'.[49] In this context, the fragment is not oriented towards completion; it only expresses incompleteness. The *ruin*, twin sister of the fragment in the Baroque world, encapsulates this very de-potentiation.

> In the field of allegoric intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished. For the *eidos* disappears, the resemblance ceases to exist, and the cosmos it contained shrivels up. The dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused ruminator (*dem verworrenen Grübler*).[50]

Benjamin's theory of reading seeks a middle-path between the Romantic system of reflection and the haphazard, confused ruminator of the Baroque *Trauerspiel*. Knowledge is situated *between* the monadic poles of clarity and confusion, between total expression and palimpsestic readability. This translates into the opposition between the monadic redemption of phenomena in the prologue, and the Trauerspiel's failing to reach redemption through the fallen language of allegory. Whilst the philosopher, just as the translator, plays the role of intercessor between the divine and the terrestrial, the allegorist is perpetually abated by the 'afterwardness' of his language. Benjamin's study of allegory explores the various expressive frameworks he set in place in his previous works as well as the possibility of 'secularizing' them into a method. From this early point onwards it is clear that the crux of his interpretation of the Monadology depends on the way in which the 'totality' expressed by the monad is understood. Through the theory of allegory, Benjamin posits the possibility of a historical totality that sidesteps historical naturalism: a totality that is neither a sum nor a universal but the negative image of the world. The monadic ('dialectical') image emerges at the convergence of allegorical semiotics and monadological metaphysics. What emerges from the foregoing analyses is that the monad and the allegory represent two opposite forms of qualitative time: whilst the monad constitutes a redeeming interruption of time, the allegory is sustained by a temporality of repetition and infinite iteration. As he examines baroque expression, Benjamin restages the classical debate of the 'fixed point' and its peculiar dynamic of centre and decentring, demonstrating the entanglement of the problems of reference and expression.

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[49] *OT*, p. 178; *GS1*, p. 354.
[50] *OT*, p. 176; *GS1*, p. 352.

Whilst the references to the Monadology in Benjamin works appear to be as pervasive as cryptic, there is a hint, in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' as to how Benjamin approached this canonical text:

> In the great philosophies the world is seen in terms of the order of ideas. But the conceptual frameworks within which this took place have, for the most part, long since become fragile. Nevertheless these systems, such as Plato's theory of ideas, Leibniz's Monadology, or Hegel's dialectic, still remain valid as attempts at a description of the world. It is peculiar to all these attempts that they still preserve their meaning, indeed they often reveal it more fully, even when they are applied to the world of ideas instead of empirical reality. For it was as descriptions of an order of ideas that these systems of thought originated. The more intensively the respective thinkers strove to outline the image of reality, the more were they bound to develop a conceptual order which, for the later interpreter, would be seen as serving that original depiction of the world of ideas which was actually intended. If it is the task of the philosopher to practise the kind of description of the world of ideas which automatically includes and absorbs the empirical world, then he occupies an elevated position between that of the researcher and the artist. The latter sketches a restricted image of the world of ideas, which, because it is conceived as a small image (*Bildchen*), is at all times definitive.[51]

A successful description of ideas is a failed theory of the world. As the philosopher attempts to depict empirical reality, her work possesses a truth, a truth that appears more clearly with historical distance, as its 'material content' evaporates. Philosophical systems undergo the same historical sedimentation as works of art: they shrink and their semiotic contents condense into images. The kernel of this 'more definitive' truth is a singular yet universal image, a monad. Benjamin reads the Monadology *after* its historical sedimentation: the Monadology is 'a summa of a theory of ideas' not only because it depicts it adequately, but because it constitutes an abridged, synoptic version of it. Itself a monad, the Monadology functions as a perfectly autonomous proof.

[51] *OT*, p. 32. Translation modified.

2. Afterlife as History

The Task of the Critic

In a 1925 letter to Scholem, Benjamin described his 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' as an 'unmitigated chutzpah – that is to say, neither more nor less than the prolegomena to epistemology […] dressed up as a theory of ideas.'[52] Accordingly, it is less the 'theory of ideas' than the set of epistemological assumptions set up in the prologue that should retain our attention. Indeed, if essences only exist through their 'presentation', then the 'redeemed' world of art can only 'reveal' itself through a certain construction of its historical content. In that sense, Benjamin's theory of essences is self-dissolving for it is only a *term* between history and the task of presentation related to it, a 'transparent medium' of intelligibility. However, what do *remain* in this process are the movements between inside and outside, the operations of inversion which tend to define Benjamin's philosophy as a 'science of thresholds.'[53] This clearly appears in Benjamin's reformulations of his theory of literary criticism. Around 1930 Benjamin's ambition was no less than to 'create criticism as genre'.[54] He was planning to publish a volume of critical essays on literature, and although the project foundered because of financial difficulties, he did leave us a number of published and unpublished materials towards the preface of this volume (to be evocatively titled 'The Task of the Critic'). In these notes, Benjamin repeatedly came back to the concept of *Fortleben* and thus located one of the main sources of his theory of criticism in his theory of translation.[55] In what

[52] Walter Benjamin, *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno, trans. Manfred R. Jacobson and Evelyn M. Jacobson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 261.

[53] Peter Osborne, 'Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*, ed. Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin, 2nd edition (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), p. 89.

[54] Walter Benjamin, 'Chronology', *SW2*, p. 836. This period was one of intense writing around the question of critique, triggered by his encounter with Bertold Brecht and the deepening of his Marxist orientation. (Ibid., p. 835) Between 1929 and 1931, he worked towards two related projects, which were never brought to completion. Firstly, he planned to publish an anthology of his works on literary criticism, the preface of which was to be named symmetrically to the translation essay, 'Die Aufgabe der Kritikers'. Secondly, Benjamin was planning to co-edit, with Brecht, a new review which was to be called *Krisis und Kritik,* a project that foundered in 1931 because of financial difficulties. (Ibid., p. 841) His preparatory notes for this new preface as well as published articles of that time synthesize Benjamin's new reflections on the relationships between literature and history: 'Literary History and the Study of Literature', *SW2*, p. 462.

[55] Walter Benjamin, 'The First Form of Criticism that Refuses to Judge', *SW2*, pp. 372-3.

follows, I will retrace the way in which the concept of 'afterlife', which previously designated the artwork's 'fame' is progressively transformed into a principle of historical interpretation.

Lingering at the core of Benjamin's theory of criticism is a reflection on the epistemological relation of the critic vis-à-vis the artwork, a relation intimately linked to the ontological incompleteness of the artwork itself. An artwork does not find its justification in the author's overt or unconscious intentions, for, as 'The Task of the Translator' already made clear, the artwork has a life: its historical existence *transcends* the act of creation itself. As a result, any criticism that restricts its gaze to the artwork without taking into account its essential historicity, i.e. any criticism that attempts to 'judge' the artwork on these narrow grounds, is deemed to failure. Benjamin unambiguously states that 'the existence of a work of art in time and the understanding of it are but two sides of the same thing.'[56] Indeed, he is not only opposed to the notion of 'timeless truth'[57] but time, in his conception, is the very *condition* of the appearance of truth: 'time is the medium of truth.'[58] In this sense, the afterlife of the work becomes the medium of its critical truth. As Chryssoula Kambas underscores, the task of the critic is to 'sharpen the awareness of the [object's] destruction by the course of time, to pursue its decomposition and transport it [….] into another form of knowledge.' [59] The critic leans on the inherent destructiveness of time to move *beyond* the aesthetic sphere: 'with the survival of the works, their character as art recedes'. For Benjamin, 'a successful form of criticism breaks through the limits of the aesthetic realm.'[60] In their survival, artworks undergo a process of 'shrinkage' (*Schrumpfung*), [61] they become

[56] Walter Benjamin, 'Literary History and the Study of Literature', *SW2*, p. 463.

[57] Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project [hereafter *AP*], transl. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge & London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), [N3, 2], p. 463.

[58] Irving Wohlfarth, 'Le "Médium" de L'histoire', *Etudes Germaniques*, 51 (1996), p. 142.

[59] Chryssoula Kambas, 'Esthétique et Interprétation Chez Walter Benjamin', trans. Agnès Bernard, *Revue Germanique Internationale [online]*, 8 (1997) <https://rgi.revues.org/641>

[60] Walter Benjamin, 'False Criticism', in *SW2*, p. 408. Here is the full exerpt, manifestly a series of points to be addressed in the final section of 'The Task of the Critic' : 'The structure of the final section will be grouped around these thesis: (1) There is a living-on (Fortleben) of the work (2) the law of this continued life is that of shrinkage; (Das Gesetz dieses Fortlebens ist die Schrumpfung) (3) with the living-on of the works, their character as art recede; (4) a successful form of criticism breaks through the limits of the aesthetic realm; (5) the technique of magical criticism' 'False Criticism', *SW2*, p. 408; *GS6* , p. 179.

[61] Walter Benjamin, 'Criticism as the Fundamental Discipline of Literary History,' *SW2*, p. 415. Benjamin explicitly borrows the notion of shrinkage from Adorno's essay 'Neue Tempi', where it designates the process by which the tempo of musical works shrinks with time, how they

ruins in which any attempt to instil a 'semblance' of life is made in vain. Yet, as Benjamin already phrased it in his letter to Rang, in this process of mortification, artworks are increasingly 'colonised by knowledge'.[62] Thus criticism opens up the work to 'our' historical experience, 'transplanting' the artwork from the 'garden of art [...] to the alien soil of science.'[63] An analogous operation is at stake in Benjamin's move from art criticism to historical critique: the 'afterlife' is gradually *translated* from art criticism to what he would come to designate as the '"critique" of the XIXth century'.[64]

Due to his growing engagement with Marxism, the problem that poses itself to Benjamin around 1930 is that of determining a historically and socially *strategic* form of criticism which neither relies on the popularizing notion of 'representative works' of conservative scholarship, nor on a purely topical, 'mercenary' engagement with literature, which he associated with the 'left-radical wing of writing and reportage'.[65] In order to think both the actuality and the history of the work, Benjamin comes back to the concepts of 'life' and 'afterlife'. As Benjamin transposes immanent criticism into a new historical terrain, the survival of the work becomes a historical *method*. Whereas 'The Task of the Translator' was built around the notion of 'living-on' (*Fortleben*), the 1930s texts tend to refer to the concept of 'afterlife' (*Nachleben*). The difference between these terms is slight but decisive, it indicates a different historical orientation.

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tend to be played faster and faster and the increasing *functionalization* of musical notation: 'the manifestations of music's existential content become smaller, and they distance themselves ever further from the great self-enclosed surface shape, ultimately becoming monadic power centres that present themselves in the transition from one existent to another, yet not longer directly in the existent itself. [...] Even if it is revealed in the work and in reality, the unity of the work is by no means canonical. It disintegrates into history; fragments are the only reality that remains of the work, while its unity transpires as mere semblance and separates off from such reality. Seeking to assert such unity after it has become questionable in the light of the work's immanent historical state means galvanizing a condition divested in life, and its living ruins are of more use to us than the dead whole. The space of the dead whole is antiquarian, and has an antiquarian validity; not, however, that of immediacy. One serves it better by preserving it silently than by seeking to create the semblance of something living.' Theodor W. Adorno, 'Neue Tempi' in *Night Music: Essays on Music 1928-1962*, trans. by Wieland Hoban (London: Seagull Books, 2009), pp. 106 & 110.

[62] Walter Benjamin, 'Letter to Florens Christian Rang', *SW1*, p. 389.

[63] Here is the full quotation, extracted from a fragment written in 1929 or 1930: 'A metaphor for criticism: Take the plants from the garden of art and transplant them to the alien soil of science, in order to obtain a detailed picture of the minute changes in color and form that appear there. The most important thing is the gentle touch, the care with which the work is taken out with its roots, for it is this that then improves the soil of knowledge. Everything else happens of its own accord, since it is the work's merits themselves that alone deserve the title of criticism in the highest sense.' Walter Benjamin, 'Program for Literary Criticism', *SW2*, p. 295.

[64] [K1a, 6]; *AP*, p. 391.

[65] Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of New Objectivity', *SW2*, p. 418.

Whilst *Fortleben* refers to a living-on, to a continuation of life from the standpoint of the work, *Nachleben* designates not so much the 'survival' of a given artwork as the traces and effects of the work on the following generations. In this sense, it echoes other theories of reception developed in the early Twentieth century, such as Otto Immisch's *Nachleben der Antike* (1919) or Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne* (1928). According to Georges Didi-Hüberman, Warburg's notion of survival emerged at the convergence of the science of culture and anthropology, as a way of thinking a complex model of evolution that would go beyond the simple opposition between progress and decay. At stake in Warburg's history of image was the presence of symptoms, traces and vestiges, which, through a still undefined 'collective memory', complicate historical time.[66] Likewise, Benjamin's concept of afterlife is bound up with the constitutive interactions between the past and the present, either as conscious influences or unconscious impacts. As such the afterlife is a retrospective construct, and its standpoint is that of *historical*, and thus fundamentally *collective* time.[67]

First cited in Benjamin's dissertation thesis,[68] Goethe's elusive claim regarding the uncriticizability of classical works is a thread running through the whole development of Benjamin's theory of criticism. Although Benjamin never departed from this axiomatic principle, he did offer successive interpretations of it, interpretations which clearly mark the transition from the notion of the survival of the work to his later philosophy of history. For instance, in a 1930 note, Benjamin explains the Goethean principle of uncriticizability of classical works through the idea that

> […]the exegesis, the ideas, the admiration and enthusiasm of past generations have become indissolubly part of the works themselves, have completely internalized them and turned them into the mirror-images of later generations. […] What emerges at this highest stage is that strategic, polemical, scholastic criticism and an exegetical, commentating form of criticism are antitheses that sublate each other [*sich aufheben*] and merge in a criticism whose sole medium is the life, the ongoing life, of the works themselves […] Indicate that my theory

[66] Georges Didi-Hüberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002), pp. 51-67.

[67] However, there is no definitive evidence as to whether Benjamin's use of these terms was entirely consistent. Although there is a clear opposition Fortleben/Nachleben between 'The Task of the Translator' and the later works, Benjamin might also have thought of these two concepts more or less interchangeably. Indeed, in the *Passagen-Werk*, he refers both to 'Nachleben Fouriers bei Zola' (*GS6*, p. 1222) and 'Fortleben Fouriers bei Zola' (*GS6*, p. 1212) – indicating the substitutability of the two terms.

[68] *CC*, p. 179.

> of criticism as a manifestation of the life of works has a connection with my theory of translation.[69]

What is made apparent in this elliptical note is that Benjamin sought to posit the life of the works as the medium of criticism. In this way, criticism not only designates the speculative reflection of the original work, but encompasses its historical refractions in a complex cascade of effects. Since the work becomes an occasion of reflexive confrontation between different generations, its principle of intelligibility lies in the history that followed it. If classics 'cannot be judged' it is because they have been filled with history; they are limitless because their boundaries have drifted into the present. Concentrating on the 'life' and 'afterlife' of the work enables the critic to grasp the work historically whilst each time thinking its relationship with a different 'present'. 'Life' here designates the historical 'experience' of the work, not as the unfolding of an internal necessity but as the result of continuous and discontinuous forms of transmissions. This life is constituted as the dialectical result of the confrontations of the work with various critical, strategic, philological and translational contexts. The critical refractions of the work are thereby constitutive of its historicity. Furthermore, by integrating the historical expressions and effects of the work into its own life, Benjamin *internalizes* the artwork's relation to history. The artwork ceases to be causally related to its historical context and becomes intensively connected to it. As with the 'idea' in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue', the artwork is a monadic 'microcosm', severed from the course of history yet 'filled' with time. This clearly appears in a published article, in which Benjamin reformulated the above reflection as follows:

> The truth, however, is that [criticism] should struggle above all with the works. Their entire life and their sphere of effect should have the right to stand alongside the history of their emergence (*Enstehungsgeschichte*). In other words, their fate, their reception by their contemporaries, their translations, their fame. For with this the work is transformed inwardly into a microcosm, or indeed a microeon. What is at stake is not to present literary works in the context of their time, but to bring to presentation the time that cognizes them – our age – in the time during which they arose. It is this that makes literature into an organon of history (*Geschichte*), and to achieve this, and not to reduce literature to the material of history (*Historie*), is the task of literary history.[70]

[69] Walter Benjamin, 'The First Form of Criticism That Refuses to Judge', *SW2*, pp. 372-3.
[70] Walter Benjamin, 'Literary History and the Study of Literature', SW2, p. 464. Translation modified.

In the first place, the lives and effects of the works become historical prisms in their articulation of the historical real. In the same fashion as the monadic structure of the idea, the living relations of the work are internalized and produce a new form, the determinations of which are not viewed from the standpoint of the artwork but from that of history. Indeed, the formal kernel of the work is constituted by a reflexive encounter between different times. Whereas *Fortleben* was formerly addressed in the singular, the afterlife is an intrinsically plural, serial term for the various receptions of a work. The expressive model here is therefore less refractive than *diffractive*: the artwork is constituted by a multiplicity of discontinuous refractions into historical 'media'. In the second place, the concept of 'organon' does not only stress the epistemological autonomy of literature but also the logical and prismatic, hence determinate, character of a criticism based on historical afterlives. If the life of the work is 'far easier to know (*erkennen*) than that of living creatures',[71] it is because it is expressively articulated, hence *readable*. Through this hermeneutical inversion, the expressive relations of Benjamin's early works are now called upon to articulate a qualitative notion of time and a critical conception of history.

Historical Experience

Benjamin exposed these ideas in 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian' (1937). At issue in this article is the status of art and art history when envisaged from a Marxist historical standpoint. Benjamin argues that when understood in relation both to its condition of production and its effects, the unity of art, as well as that of particular artworks, dissolves.[72] Fuchs' activity of collecting proved crucial for rethinking this unity and for generalising the concept of art beyond its bourgeois definition. Collecting allowed him to move beyond the sphere of 'beautiful art' without getting caught into the snare of a historicist cultural history. Collecting and archiving were, according to Benjamin, the practical answers to the 'aporias of theory' of a Marxist theory of art.[73] It is significant that, as he addresses the problem of reception from the angle of materialism, Benjamin does not lose sight of his previous theory of the 'afterlife' of the

[71] *TT*, p. 255.
[72] Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', *SW3*, p. 261.
[73] Ibid., p. 263.

artwork. Instead, Benjamin rearticulates the Goethean notion of the artwork's effect (*Wirkung*) within the materialist terms of production, reproduction, and social function of art. He anticipates that the relational, expressive historicity he has previously unravelled can sidestep the simplistic account of the relationships between infrastructure and superstructure put forward by orthodox Marxism. Instead of turning history into the material base of artistic and cultural production, Benjamin expands his theory of (art) criticism to historiography. He clearly makes this connexion when stating that historical materialism conceives historical understanding as an afterlife (*Nachleben*) of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present.'[74] To understand historically (*Geschichtliches Verstehen*)[75] means adopting the standpoint of the continued effects of the historical object, it means placing oneself in the axis of its continued relevance. This has both epistemic and ontological consequences for the philosophy of history. The historian must 'abandon the calm, contemplative attitude toward his object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present.' [76] This experience involves a critical construction of objectivity. [77] Paradoxically, then, the historian is at once the *producer* and the *receiver* of his experience. In fact, the dialectical historian translates the constructive relationship between the artwork and history into the relationship between historical experience and history.

> For the dialectical historian concerned with works of art, these works integrate their fore-history (*Vorgeschichte*) as well as their after-history (*Nachgeschichte*); and it is by virtue of their after-history that their fore-history is recognizable as involved in a continuous process of change.[78]

Provided with the dual insight of the fore- and after- history, the historical object becomes an 'origin' in the sense given in the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue'.[79] This ongoing process of historical individuation prevents the artwork's reification as cultural heritage.[80] By expanding the scope of art history to 'marginal areas such as

[74] Ibid., p. 262.
[75] *GS2*, p. 468.
[76] Walter Benjamin, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', *SW3*, p. 262.
[77] Ibid., p. 262.
[78] Ibid., p. 261.
[79] Ibid., note 9, p. 288.
[80] Ibid., p. 267.

caricature and pornographic imagery' and by reorganising the unities of art according to principles of reproduction and reception, Fuchs unknowingly founded a new concept of *historical object*.[81] As Benjamin writes, the object of historical science

> […] is not formed of a tangle of pure facticities but of a numbered group of threads, which presents the woof of a past fed into the warp of the present. ([…] For centuries, threads can become lost, only to be picked up again by the present course of history in a disjointed and inconspicuous way.) The historical object removed from pure facticity does not need any 'appreciation'. It does not offer vague analogies to actuality, but constitutes itself in the precise dialectical task which actuality is obliged to resolve.[82]

The historical object is not a fact: it is constituted as a task and as an imperative. The dialectical image is the very *locus* of this task. As for the monad, the relational specification of the historical object preserves its singularity whilst presenting it as a historical totality. Whereas Benjamin's move from 'Fortleben' to 'Nachleben' indicates his turn from art criticism to historiography, his move from 'Nachleben' to 'Vor-' and 'Nachgeschichte' marks the transformation of the historical object into a moving centre of *perspective*. Thinking the historical object as an origin amounts to the 'Copernician revolution in historical perception,'[83] by which the present itself becomes the focal point of historical critique: 'The present determines where, in the object from the past, that object's fore-history and after-history diverge so as to circumscribe its nucleus.'[84] Whilst the concept of *Nachleben* belongs to Benjamin's expanded theory of criticism (and thus to the *interpretation* of history), the dual notion of *Vor-* and *Nachgeschichte* is part of his speculative conception of history as awakening (of the interruptive *experience* of history).

History is the object of a construction (*Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion*). [85] Against the fantasies of *reconstruction* that directed positivist historians, who wanted to live the past 'as it really was', Benjamin opposed a perspectival conception of historical knowledge as the *experience* of history. In this scheme, lines of perspective have replaced the theatrical stage of historicism: the *object*

[81] Ibid., p. 269.
[82] Ibid., p. 269. Translation modified.
[83] [K1, 2]; *AP*, p. 389 .
[84] [N11, 5] *AP*, p. 476.
[85] *GS1*, p. 701.

of historical materialism becomes undistinguishable from its experience, not as pure fabrication but insofar as it is constituted by an essential temporal openness and by the transformability of its boundaries. Thus *experienced*, any object subjected to historical investigation can be found to express a historical totality. As he would write in the context of a famous epistolary exchange with Adorno,

> The appearance of self-contained facticity that emanates from philological study and casts its spell on the scholar is dispelled according to the degree to which the object is constructed in historical perspective. The lines of perspective in this construction, receding to the vanishing point, converge in our own historical experience. In this way, the object is constituted as a monad. In the monad, the textual detail which was frozen in a mythical rigidity comes alive.[86]

The distance between the object and the point at which its different lines converge, the point of its 'truth', is a function of time, and thus 'reading' is part of the historical dynamic itself. In light of his concept of historical construction, Benjamin oscillates between ontological and epistemo-phenomenal accounts of the historical object, an oscillation that the Monadology encapsulates. Monadic metaphysics operates as a link between these two levels. How, asks Benjamin, do we introduce more perceptibility, more intuition or vision (*Anschauligkeit*) within the Marxist method?[87] The monad designates both a specific metaphysical construction of history *and* a space of perceptibility. Both originate in a structure of expression, which, to reiterate, is at once an objective structure of relations and a perceptual environment. The redrawing of the object's boundaries has the effect of preserving a given totality within one of its fragments. This gesture of self-delimitation, which was already at the heart of the Romantic worldview, reorganises the relationship between the 'epistemology' and the 'metaphysics' of history.

Although the mutual entanglements between Benjamin's philosophy of language and his conception of history have been abundantly addressed in the secondary literature, their direct correlate, Benjamin metaphysics of expression, has remained partly obscured by the reluctance of commentators to stress the existence of a 'metaphysical' component in his philosophy. And yet, the coherence of Benjamin's œuvre as a whole

[86] Walter Benjamin, 'Exchange with Theodor W. Adorno on "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire"', *SW4*, p. 108.
[87] [N2, 6]; *AP*, p. 461.

depends on his interpretation of language as an expressive relationality, which, from inception, constitutes a medium of historical intelligibility. Whereas, in the first phase, the expressive metaphysical framework is (theologically) posited as primary, in the second expressivity becomes an *effect* or *correlate* of a specific configuration. In this sense, Benjamin evolved from a straightforward metaphysics of essence to a speculative concept of historical experience.[88] As an enclosed totality or, what is the same, an immanent absolute, the monad embodies this very passage between metaphysics and experience. Therefore, the metaphysical dimension of Benjamin's philosophy does not vanish with his move to 'materialism': it is the perspective from which it is read that changes. This mysterious imbrication is best illustrated in a fragment from Benjamin's preparatory notes to the *Trauerspiel*: 'Methodic relation of the metaphysical analysis to historical analysis: the stocking turned inside-out.'[89]

Fighting the 'false universalism of the methods of cultural history',[90] the epic narratives of historiography and the idea of culture (*Kultur*) itself, Benjamin steadily pursues the path of an 'interior' history. This history is interior not only because it is individually and collectively experienced but because its relational texture is interior: history is constituted by intensive as well as extensive mediations. Finally, exploding the continuum of progress by isolating the object of historical experience was not only a historiographic principle but also a crucial step towards the dissolution of the philosophy of culture (*Bildung*) and its organicism, back to a philosophy of the image (*Bild*). This way, Benjamin retrieved the logic of expression from the historicist conception of culture *in two ways*: by focusing on the image or monad as the locus of truth and by grounding a qualitative conception of time upon it.

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[88] On the notion of 'speculative experience', see: Matthew Charles, 'Speculative Experience and History: Walter Benjamin's Goethean Kantianism', *doctoral thesis* (Middlesex University, 2009).

[89] '*Methodisches Verhältnis der metaphysischen Untersuchung zur historischen: der umgekehrte Strumpf* '(*GS1*, p. 918), quoted by Peter Osborne in 'Small-Scale Victories, Large-Scale Defeats', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy. Destruction and Experience*, ed. Peter Osborne and Andrew Benjamin, 2nd edition (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), p. 58.

[90] Walter Benjamin, 'Literary History and the Study of Literature, *SW2*, p. 460.

Epilogue: Afterlife as Translation

> For the creative person, the medium surrounding his work is so dense that he may find himself unable to penetrate it directly in terms of the response that it requires from the public; he may be able to penetrate it only in an indirect manner. The composer might perhaps see his music, the painter, hear his picture, or the poet feel the outline of his poem when he seeks to come as close to it as possible.[91]

Reading Benjamin's later writings on criticism and history back into 'The Task of the Translator' allows us to rethink his philosophy of translation in light of a different conception of history. If we follow the trajectory of the concept of afterlife in Benjamin's works, translation features both as a determinate expression of an artwork's life and as a historical *organon*. Literary translation is a special genre of reception and transmission. Whilst it always poses the question of the transformation and reactualization of a given work, the time and places in which a work is translated or retranslated indicate something about the historical, contextual or political relevance of a work. The history of translations has the potential to reorganise art or literary history in a way that troubles the idea of a continuous stream of transmission and the purity of 'tradition'. To follow the paths of translation means witnessing the plurality of destinations of a work, for each translation constitutes a historical crystallization, a determinate perspective on a given work.[92] From this vantage point translation is both a *part* of a historical-cultural process of reception, transmission and interpretation and provides us with an *image of this process as a whole*. It has a documentary value for history and encapsulates a historical logic. In translation, the mortification (the death of the original's intention) and continuation of the work 'beyond', into another medium, are entirely entangled. More than any other operation on language, translation thematizes the continuity in discontinuity that is characteristic of the historical process. Therefore, in Benjamin's works, narrow and generalised notions of translation are dialectically entangled: there is no 'task of translation' that is

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[91] Walter Benjamin, 'The Medium through Which Works of Art Continue to Influence Later Ages', *SW1*, p. 235.

[92] Translation thus possesses a *documentary* value analogous to that of language. In Benjamin's view, language *is* indeed a memory in itself: it is a 'repository' of similarities in which we can read its past history.

not itself embedded within a larger historical logic, but there is equally no historical logic of cultural forms that does not depend on the movement and survival of works across languages – be they natural or 'regional' (disciplinary).

In Benjamin's philosophy, however, this heuristic function of translation seems to hinge upon the ontology of 'great works' and classics, for they are the ones that are periodically subjected to retranslations and whose 'success' can be analysed over long periods of time.[93] In reality, the theory of the afterlife is a double-edged sword, for at the same time as being grounded on the 'fame' of the work it also provokes the dissolution of the artwork's unity (and therefore of its aura and of the primacy of the original). If the truth of the artwork, as he already stated in 'Goethe's Elective Affinities', is only disclosed through time or under the effect of time, the artwork is in a state of perpetual belatedness in relation to its 'truth'. To think the artwork in the unity of its effects through time is already to assert the disappearance of the 'here and now of the work of art'.[94] The persistence of the notion of the afterlife within the Marxist-sociological account of the effects of cultural products ensures that the relationship between the historian and his object is not reifying. Even as a product or commodity, the 'object' remains expressive; it is never the dead endpoint of an analysis. Therefore, the Schlegelian imperative of 'starting from the middle', as well as the decentred metaphysics of Leibniz, remained crucial throughout.

Translation thus functions at three levels in Benjamin's philosophy: at the level of natural languages, at the level of disciplines or 'territories',[95] and at the level of historical 'media'. There is an intrinsic link between the logic of transdisciplinary translation and the Monadology: the latter functions as a metaphysical justification of the former. On the one hand, the Monadology operates as a passageway between art and science, insofar as, through the 'logic' of expression, it articulates 'scientific' logic together with the 'semiotic' of art and images. On the other hand, the Monadology is a principle of decentred universality, which reads specific 'cases' as totalities. Whereas

[93] In order to sidestep this limitation, what we need is a rearticulation of this theory from the standpoint of his later essays on the work of art as a mass product and the social function of art, but such an investigation exceeds the scope of this thesis.

[94] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility,' *SW4*, p. 253.

[95] Walter Benjamin, 'Curriculum Vitae (III)', in *SW2*, p. 78.

the afterlife unfolds in time, the Benjaminian monad is an instantaneous, perfected expression of history. The artwork, the idea and the historical object are thereby embedded in a transversal logic of generalisation that abolishes their metaphysical hierarchy.

From art to science, from the philosophy of language to materialism, from the 'domain of nature to that of history',[96] Benjamin commented on the *metabases* and translations constitutive of his own thought on various occasions. As we have seen, his early metaphysics of language contributed to supporting this approach by developing the idea of language as 'medium'. A central premises of 'On Language as Such' was precisely the possibility of a radical extension of the domain of language into what we would call, today, 'discursive formations': 'It is possible to talk about a language of music and of sculpture, about a language of justice […] about a language of technology'.[97] Whilst Benjamin's theory of art criticism can be held as configuring a way in which the 'language of things' or 'nature' can be immanently turned into conceptuality, his theory of history can be read as the translation between different historical times as precise 'textures', operating from within their immanent connexions.

From this investigation it clearly appears that Benjamin's works harbour at once several theories and several practices of translation. The generalised metaphysics of expression expounded in his earliest works was ceaselessly transformed but remained a fundamental resource of his thought. Benjamin's translational history encapsulates the integration of the interpretive acts within history's constitution. The process of interpretation embedded in cultural forms is objective – it is not the result of the encounter between a subject and an object but between different readings, different actualizations of the work. Retracing the evolution of Benjamin's reflections on translation together with the transformation of his metaphysics of expression has uncovered the analogous role played by the *afterlife* and the *monad* in the economy of Benjamin's thought as interfaces between the metaphysical domain and historical knowledge. Together, they produce another theory of reception, one that does not evolve as a cascading stream or in a tree of influences, but is made of interruptions. This other model seizes the historical object at the prismatic centre of the plurality of

[96] [N2a, 4]; *AP*, p. 462.
[97] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man,' *SW1*, p. 62.

its expression, each of which are 'versions' – critiques, translations – marking different 'ends' (mortifications) of the work. The artwork's historicity is thereby subjected to a historical stoppage, which reveals its historical-ontological articulation. Afterlife and monad are, therefore, two forms of historical *individuation*. In this sense, 'translation' as historical operator does not only perform an ontological role in drawing and re-drawing boundaries around the historical 'realization' of objects, but also performs a critical-epistemological function by conferring them a form of intelligibility that is at once extrinsic and immanent.

Conclusion

Translation has only recently ceased to be considered as a simple *technique* of philosophy to become its *object*. In this move, fundamental ambiguities are uncovered about the nature of this concept. What are its scope and boundaries? What is its philosophical or metaphilosophical role?

In the foregoing analyses, the problem of translation featured as a point of contact between epistemology, metaphysics and method. Three propositions emerge from the different parts of the thesis. Firstly, in all three parts translation acquires a critical-epistemological dimension in opposition to the subject-object relation. Secondly, they all address translation as a form of transformation. Thirdly, they all thematize translation as a relation without exteriority or as an 'inside passage'. These three propositions set out a new framework to rethink the meaning of the philosophical concept of translation in so-called 'postcolonial times', a framework that is at once relational, decentered and fundamentally productive (or ontological) at the historical level. The critical *actuality* of translation, I suggest, is due to translation's capacity to crystallise the essential conflictuality generated by claims to universal knowledge while providing the means for its (partial) resolution. The problem of translation thus appears to be a particularly effective site to re-problematize the perennial question of the unity of philosophy with specific reference to its geopolitical critique.

In contrast to the diffuse critical relevance of translation in recent times, the present thesis has undertaken a study of its concept at the philosophical level. How shall we rethink its problem after postcolonial critique and in light of new paradigms of 'globality'? Inquiring into its emergence as a philosophical problem enabled me to highlight the limits of the framework by which translation has been traditionally understood in modern European philosophy. As the first chapter has shown, the German hermeneutic and post-romantic conceptions of translation, which gave rise to what is now commonly grasped as an 'ethics of translation', remain subordinated to the teleology of nationalism. I argued that the latter cannot be simply 'globalized' since it continues to be entangled with a version of 'cultural' experience that is ideally

regulated by the notion of *Bildung*. Therefore, it cannot *pose* the problem, and thus produce the necessary overturn, of the alliance between anthropology and the philosophy of history that formed the kernel of the racial and colonial ideologies. To go pass this limitation, what is needed is no less than a reversal of perspective; that is, to rethink translation not from the standpoint of the intersubjective movement, but from the vantage point of units of meaning (artworks, words, concepts). This reversal is pivotal to the thesis as a whole, shifting the analysis's focal point from the interpreter to the object – or *form* – undergoing the translation. The possibility of such an overturn was preliminarily explored through an analysis of Frantz Fanon's works, which reconfigured the national *telos* from the revolutionary standpoint of the Algerian decolonization struggle. Reading Fanon's writings on the shifting role played by the radio in the Algerian struggle led me to formulate a conception of translation as 'semiotic transformation'. Fanon endeavoured to show the key role of semiotic transmutations in national emancipation. By becoming the sites of active mediation with the colonizer, new sociocultural practices had the potential to liberate Algerian society from the imposed Manichaeism of the colonial situation, freeing its semiotic fabric from race altogether. Although Fanon's account presents us with a largely idealised conception of the war of decolonization, it nevertheless poses the problem in a way entirely different from the romantic and post-romantic narratives of transformation of the self through the *foreign*: here there is no balance to be struck between the proper and the foreign as both realms have already been entirely muddled in colonial domination. From Fanon's perspective, the paradigm of cultural dialogue could only be a version of enlightened colonialism.[1]

Whilst the first chapter demonstrated the existence of a close connexion between the emergence of translation as an object of philosophical concern and the earliest formulations of German cultural nationalism, the second chapter investigated the ethical dimensions attributed to translation in the post-deconstruction era. In a postcolonial world marked by racial and interethnic violence, translation's aporetic character became a privileged site for the figuration of the ethical relation to the Other. Practising the difference of languages came to constitute a safeguard against cultural homogenisation and the hegemony of dominant languages. This reveals especially

[1] See : Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Négritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World-Wars* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2005)

clearly from my reading of Spivak, whose 'politics of translation' depends on setting the incompletable nature of its task as its premise. For all its plausibility, this emphasis on the untranslatable – which I have traced through Berman, Spivak, Cassin and Apter – remains partial. Focusing on translation as an impossible seam, it avoids addressing the *constitutive* function of translation in history. In order to address the latter, one has to think the aporetic together with the positive, the 'impassable' with the transformative.

At the same time, deconstruction's importance is undeniable, binding philosophy's fate to the problematic of translation for the first time in the history of philosophy. Once translation is considered as an integral part of the production of philosophical discourse, it becomes philosophy's very condition of possibility. In light of Derrida's 1970s works this was not a purely formal requirement but also a historical one. Articulating deconstruction with decolonisation, he analysed philosophical language as an interface between the problem of *form* and that of natural, political and historical *idioms*. For him, the destabilisation of the semiotic boundaries of language operated by deconstruction would be able to rearticulate the relationship between philosophy and the diversity of historically specific idioms. Indeed, Derrida considered that no 'geopolitical' transformation of philosophy could occur without a reflection on the workings of its language, i.e. its own form. The metaphilosophical question of the translation of philosophy in globalization is thereby linked to the 'infraphilosophical' problematic of formalism; the generalising instance is thus questioned through its constitutive mediations.

As the second chapter elucidated, any theory of translation as relation hinges upon a questioning of the multiplicity of languages: 'upwards' to the possibility of a universal or 'pure' language and 'downwards' to the internal difference of language and the semiotic instance. The fundamentally multi-scalar character of language is partly responsible for what has been deemed to be translation's unchecked proliferation in the humanities. Retrospectively, this metaphorical overuse of 'translation' reveals itself crucial to launch the thesis as a whole. If translation were only a metaphor or image it would be easily substituted for other terms, such as hybridity, creolization, and the like. Against such a view, this thesis defended the singularity and exemplarity of translation as a concept. This meant qualifying it as a specific form of relation, the main

characteristics of which were established as follows: *Firstly*, as Naoki Sakai has formulated, translation is an 'instance of continuity in discontinuity'. *Secondly*, it is an immanent passage between two languages. And *thirdly*, given the multiplicity of its determinations, it can only be grasped as a complex or 'complicated' articulation. As Berman argues, the relational density holding between an original and a translation is unique. By putting two texts, forms or languages in relation, every translation constitutes a singular *method* unto itself; a method which, to a certain extent, cannot be repeated elsewhere. Translation is thus a truly paradoxical method: it articulates and unfolds without simplifying its object but remaining unique to it.

One of the central claims of this thesis is therefore that the distinction between 'narrow' and 'generalised' paradigms of translation is not to be ruled out or preempted from the problem of translation but that it forms its very kernel. So-called 'cultural translation' acquires its meaning from textual translation and vice versa, the 'narrow', textual interpretation of translation necessarily functions by means of its 'generalised' counterpart. Few descriptions of translation 'proper' have no recourse to images and metaphors, a problem that begins from the inevitably imagistic etymology of the word 'translation' itself.[2] In order to account for this dynamic, what is needed is an extension of the scope of the philosophy of translation from an interrogation that is centred on the problem of language only, to one that includes that of *form*. Addressing translation from the double standpoint of form and language enables us to substantiate the notion of *transformation.* Indeed, as the third chapter has shown, the assertion that *translation is a transformation* becomes tautological as soon as the thesis of translation as 'equivalence' is ruled out. Two given forms can be grasped as transformations or variations of one another in multiple ways as long as there is a qualitative relation between them. The notion of transformation is intrinsically bound to that of resemblance and is as unspecific as the latter. It is only from the vantage point of a specific conception of history that the notion of *translation as transformation* acquires a positive meaning. Both in their own ways, Serres and Benjamin were developing a relational expressivity that would not depend on, but rather produce, resemblance.

[2] In 'Interpreting the Meaning of Translation,' Andrew Chesterman provides an interesting list of the various meanings of the concept of translation in different non-European languages, which expand its traditional etymology. They range from 'moving', 'turning over', to 'change'. Andrew Chesterman, 'Interpreting the Meaning of Translation', in *A Man of Measure*, ed. M. Suominen (Turku : Linguistic Association of Finland, 2006), pp. 3-11.

Understanding that resemblance is only an effect, both were looking for a cause of correspondences.

The genealogical and formal reconstructions of the philosophical problem of translation carried out in Part One prompted my investigations into Michel Serres and Walter Benjamin's philosophies, in Part Two and Part Three respectively. Their works provide us with two different ways of *articulating together* the aporetic and the transformative, the hermeneutic and ontological facets of translation. This clearly transpires from their recurrent return to the notion of the 'passage', in which relation and method overlap. Such 'passages' are both paths and method of truth, journey maps and truth conveyers. In his early writings, Benjamin drew extensively on the notion of a 'secret' – or 'intensive' – passage of truth between different ontological strata of language, which reached its most achieved formulations in his conception of the idea as monad, and later in the notion of dialectical image. An image is a singular structure of expression, at the threshold of the historical and the metaphysical. Like the *passages* of Paris, it is a mysterious instance of mediation between the 'inside' and the 'outside'. Serres, on the other hand, proceeded by juxtapositions of cartographies: his initial structuralist topography was first supplemented and then progressively overturned by energetic circuits and fractal topologies. As I demonstrated, Serres relentlessly played on the paradox of an interrupted relation, a relation that is also a 'non-relation'. In his works, the aporetic and the transformative coexist as the two sides of a fold, reflecting the copresence of literature and the sciences. Albeit differently, Benjamin and Serres' works converge in formulating a *philosophy of the medium*; thematizing translation as a *passage* that is neither sheer relation nor conclusive mediation in the Hegelian sense, but rigorously a *space of effectuation*. For both authors, the monad operated, literally, as a *key*: as a point of inversion, conversion, synthesis or interruption, it functions as the 'elementary mesh' of a decentered systematicity.

The pivotal role played by Leibniz in this convergence is to be grasped from a complex historical standpoint. Through his theory of expression, Leibniz considerably opened up the scope of the concept of language. By ascribing a metaphysical character to language and linguistic relations, he formalised the connexion between the metaphysics of form and language, between a generalised and a narrowly textual,

conception of language or between what would later become semiotics and linguistics. The German Romantic theories of 'romanticization' and 'versability' were directly drawn from this singular expansion. In retrospect, his crucial idea was not that all expressions could form a closed totality or system (the world) but rather the fundamental *ambiguity* at the heart of Leibniz's Monadology between open and closed, an ambiguity that first came to light in the Romantic conception of the fragment,[3] on which Benjamin drew at length. Serres, who initially claimed that the Romantic concept of form was a 'thing of the past', eventually came back to it in the course of undoing structural systematicity. The *Passage du Nord-Ouest* is a fragmented passage, which is neither closed nor open but modelled, like the monad, upon the notion of an immanent infinity.

In so far as Benjamin and Serres address translation within the framework of a larger metaphysics of expression, their inquiry is situated in a position of anteriority *vis-à-vis* the cultural and national-based paradigms that became prevalent after the Enlightenment, within a domain of inquiry that is at once ontological, linguistic and historical. Both of their critiques of Kantian epistemology depend upon the convergence of these three elements within a single ontology of relations. A theory of knowledge located immanently to the network of expression relies on the *conversion* of the ontological into the linguistic, hence on a strong theory of *reading*. As Benjamin's works show, the 'textualization' at stake here is *not* in principle incompatible with materialism because it takes place at the level of the theory of knowledge. Reading Leibniz after Kant and Hegel, Serres and Benjamin adopted the monadology at once as an epistemological and historical operator by interpreting it at the same time as formal ontology of relations and as a model of language. It is precisely from the *overlapping* of *ontology* and *language* that there arises the possibility of transforming this formal ontology into an organon, a method or a means of knowledge.

For both authors, Leibniz's Monadology also functioned as a model of relational, qualitative time. Adopting the standpoint of qualitative time had two effects on their conception of history. On the one hand, it sustained the idea of temporal discontinuity

[3] Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988)

within history: time is at once a complex, mobile and fluid multiplicity of transformations, and 'logically' organised around nodes, stars or constellations. On the other hand, being relational, time acquires heuristic dimensions: to the extent that any transformation is constituted by a multiplicity of determinations, it carries the index of its own intelligibility. Time is productive of knowledge. Michel Serres' work on the historicity of mathematics and Walter Benjamin's work on the 'afterlife' both lead to the idea that translation, if conceived as the transformation of forms in the horizon of an open systematicity, can be grasped as an internal or autonomous method. Translation is a paradigmatic example of transformation in so far as it reconfigures the text into a multiplicity, into a complex field of changes. The text is no longer bound by its narrative, semantic or syntactic coherence but opens itself from within, at the level of each of its 'elements' (sentences, words, semantic units). The object becomes a historical prism, which carries its 'science' in itself. In this sense, it is not translation that is a form of transformation, but transformation, that is a form of translation.

Although this general orientation is common to Serres and Benjamin, the way they developed it and the consequences they drew from it led them widely apart. Serres developed his relational philosophy of history starting from a purely formal diagrammatic structure. He initially conceptualised the historical process as a transformation moving from an infinite plurality of events to a rigorous succession, from probability to overdetermination. For him, understanding historical transformation amounted to grasping how a multilinear table could turn into the law of a sequence.[4] Although his philosophy is sustained by a relational form of time, there is no such formalism in Benjamin. His anti-systemic views prevented him from passing from the monad to the monadology. Given that he sought to exit the formalism of his early structuralism, Serres *naturalized* this formal relationality by materializing language. This forced him to put aside the historicity and inherent complexity proper to meaning. In contrast, Benjamin's Marxism did not result in a direct materialization of expression. He instead thematized expression as the point of contact between social practices and formal construction, as an interface of historical legibility.

[4] Michel Serres, 'Le réseau de communication : Pénélope', *Hermès I, La communication* (Paris, Editions de Minuit, 1968), pp. 18-19.

Finally, the reference to the monadology proved fundamental as a model of universality. The total part is a part that expresses, rather than subsumes, a totality; its 'universality' is at once logical and semiotic or linguistic. This opens up the possibility of a transdisciplinary logic, which decentres philosophy as discourse and singularly expands the problem of scientificity. The logic of expression enables us to rethink the relationships between art and science in a way that is not one of mutual exclusion, but of mutual imbrications. Both Serres and Benjamin conceive the logic of expression as a way of grounding the translational dynamic of philosophy. In *L'Interférence*, Serres conceives the system of the sciences as a monadology, but later departs from this idea. What remains is the translational logic of passage between different discourses, and in particular science, philosophy and literature. In contrast, Benjamin takes up Leibniz's system as a logic of singularity, privileging the monad over the monadology. It is not transcendental translatability, but rather the singular historical expressivity of each 'monad' that each time turns the monad into a translational operator between disciplinary constructs.

Hence, the alternative genealogy of translation elaborated in the course of this thesis has thrown into relief a complex historical concatenation. Reading Serres and Benjamin alongside one another shows that it is *because* they relied on a *pre-critical* metaphysics of language that their theories of translation could operate as a *post-Kantian critique* of epistemology. Both philosophers did so by capitalizing on the ambiguity of Leibniz's theory of expression. Indeed, to the extent that it is constituted by a relentless back and forth between a narrow and generalised conception of language, the theory of expression *is* and *is not* a 'metaphysics.' This fundamental ambiguity enabled Benjamin and Serres to adjourn or suspend this 'metaphysics' into a method *of* legibility, which could operate both as a critique of epistemology and as an alternative conception of the 'objectivity' of knowledge.

The epistemological stakes of translation can be succinctly formulated by means of the following problem: to the extent that every theory of translation is premised upon a conception of language, it is imperative to render the latter more explicit. However, translation as a process or an activity is absolutely not *explicit* because it is always subjected to some form of *indetermination*. Even if it depends on precise 'laws' of

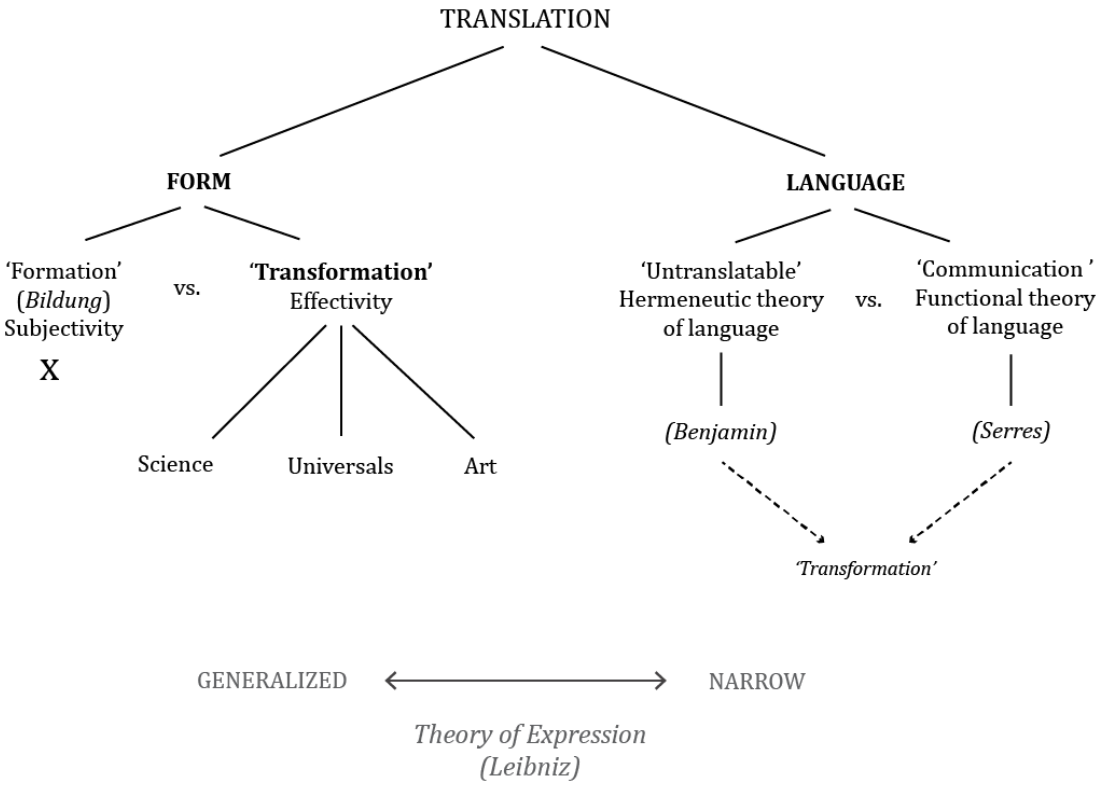
transformation, translation cannot thematize its own functioning by adopting a meta-position with regard to itself. We can no more have a complete grip on the translation process than we can have on 'our own' language. Through facilitating the contact between languages, translation encapsulates the problem of languages and of their difference to the greatest extent. Insofar as languages do not have 'exteriority', they can only be 'equated' internally. This explains the fundamental affinity, articulated throughout this thesis, between the problem of translation and the theory of perspective. The idea that translation occupies a 'gap or a void' (*une place en creux*) strictly means that the difference of languages is a difference that we cannot encapsulate or objectify: we can only practice it. Likewise, a perspectival conception of science is one in which the passage between one perspective and another is possible, but in which no access to the whole via an overbearing view is provided. It is at this level that the investigations carried out in this thesis reflect a number of contemporary attempts to rethink the universal, and philosophy itself, on the basis of another 'universality'.

Searching for a historical and theoretical construction of the concept of translation that would bypass Romantic and post-Romantic philosophies of culture has led me to inquire into philosophies of language that are fundamentally relational philosophies. This path has led me back to structuralism, to the Romantic 'medium of reflection' and to Leibniz's *Monadology*. This brought into relief a complex affinity between the problem of translation and the Monadology, which have both proven pivotal in the formulation of 'decentered epistemologies': translation standing as its *practical evidence* and the monadology, as its *metaphysical projection*. In both cases what is at stake is the rethinking of the unity of truth as pluralism, or the rethinking of 'universality' through perspectivism.

However, the logic of pluralism is paradoxical. To predicate the universality of the philosophical upon the translational conflictuality of philosophy's languages pre-empts and immunizes philosophy from its own destabilisation. If a 'translational universality' provides us with a horizontal or 'lateral' form of universality, this remains an ideal-type that can only be incarnated through practice. The difficulty stems not from *validating* translation as a model of symmetry, but rather in thinking it as a *concrete model*. To

affirm that translation has the potential of producing commonality does not render it a transcendental guarantee, but only a decentred path through knowledge and a practical 'method'.

Table 1. Translation Diagramme



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